

THE TITANIC EXPLOITS OF THE
THEM ALL—THE GLORY—

CAPTAIN

THE GREAT

BY TED WHITE WITH AN

MOST SPECTACULAR SUPERHERO OF
STUDD POWERHOUSE KNOWN AS

AMERICA

GOLD STEAL

INTRODUCTION BY STAN LEE!



CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE GREAT GOLD STEAL

A NOVEL BY TED WHITE

Dedication:

To Jack Kirby and
Stan Lee
without whom there would
be no Captain America

THE ORIGIN OF CAPTAIN AMERICA

Steve Rogers was born on July 9, 1917. Orphaned in his youth, he grew to be a pitifully puny physical specimen who devoted all his energies to intellectual pursuit. Sensing the outbreak of World War II, Rogers attempted to join the Army and was rejected as unfit.

Crushed, he returned to his studies at Columbia University until a strange letter summoned him to the Department of Justice. Because of his negative qualifications, Steve Rogers was to become the guinea pig in a bold experiment—**Operation Rebirth**.

For weeks, Rogers underwent an exhaustive series of tests and operations. Steel tubing was inserted into the marrow of his bones. He was subjected to rigorous physical training and fed new high protein compounds. Day by day, the weakling grew into an amazing physical dynamo.

And then, the final treatment—a secret chemical injected into Steve Rogers' system gave him complete control over every nerve, muscle and cell in his now magnificent body.

From that time on, Steve Rogers could withstand extraordinary physical punishment; his metabolism could be speeded up or slowed down at will; wounds would heal in half the normal time; and, he became impervious to disease, numbing cold or blistering heat.

Steve Rogers the scholar, became the invincible human juggernaut destined to champion the cause of world justice

—the living legend known as

CAPTAIN AMERICA!

INTRODUCTION

by STAN LEE

Many are the superheroes who have risen from the carnage and the devastation of World War II...but none more gallant, none more daring, none more inspiring than the red-white-and-blue-clad avenger who has fired the imagination of two generations of freedom-loving fans.

Where is the heart that does not beat faster at the mere mention of his glory-studded name? Where is the pulse that does not quicken at the sight of his lithe, muscular form—his flashing shield—his colorful costume? Where is the spy, the traitor, the murderous arch-fiend who does not tremble in unabashed terror at the awesome sight of democracy's greatest defender?

For those who have already thrilled to his fantastic exploits within the pages of world-famed Marvel Comics, we need say no more. But, if you are about to meet him for the first time, be prepared for one of the most unforgettable experiences of your life as you fight side by side with the living legend of World War II—the most universally honored hero of his time—the dazzling human dynamo whom men call...CAPTAIN AMERICA.

CHAPTER 1

DEATH BY LASER

In Lower Manhattan there squats a heavy gray building. Although over a dozen stories tall, it seems hemmed in by the tall skyscrapers that surround it.

This is New York City's financial district. Across the narrow street downtown from the gray building is the beautiful Chase Manhattan Plaza—headquarters for one of the world's largest commercial banks. A little to the east is Bankers Trust. A new building is going up on the southwest, which will also house a bank, and yet another is rising directly north. All of these buildings are or will be giants, and they tower high over the heavy gray building, cutting it off from sunshine and the sky.

But this forbidding structure dominates them all.

A dark gray Continental swung east off Broadway, on Liberty Street. It was 7:30 p.m., and the color was already gone from the chill fall air. Cabs still cruised the narrow, canyon-like streets, but most of the office workers had left for the night. The tall, thin man with the bald head threaded his Continental effortlessly through the thinning traffic, swinging left again into Liberty Place, a gloomy alley-like street only a block long. A no-parking sign stood at the curb, but the bald-headed man gave a negligent twist to his wrist and, aided by power steering, bumped his big car up over the curb, and to rest, half blocking the sidewalk. There was

only scant room for other cars to slip past, but it didn't appear to concern the man. There was little traffic on this neglected street, anyhow.

The man remained seated behind the wheel for several moments, apparently lost in thought. Passersby, what few there were on this early night, would have given him only a token glance. Sitting in the luxurious car, wearing a handsome dark topcoat and a black Homburg, the tall thin man appeared obviously a part of his surroundings; a banker perhaps, certainly a financier.

A smile tugged at his lips. He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a gold cigarette case. It held extra-long filter cigarettes. As he removed it, something else fell into his lap, a money clip, a few bills folded into it.

He started to return the money to his pocket and then, instead, separated a bill and stared at it thoughtfully.

It was a single dollar bill, one of the new ones. These did not say "Silver Certificate" on them; they were not backed by silver.

"Only by promises..." the man murmured to himself. "And we'll see about those."

The bill was a Federal Reserve Note, Series 1963 A. To the left of the portrait of George Washington was a seal, with the large letter "B" in its center. "Federal Reserve Bank of New York, New York," it said.

One block further east was Nassau Street. On the other side of Nassau sat the gloomy gray building, its sides bounded by Liberty Street, Nassau Street, Maiden Lane, and William Street. Its walls were great blocks of sooty granite. Its windows were heavily barred.

"B".

The Federal Reserve Bank of New York, New York. 44 Maiden Lane. The bank that dominates all the banking in New York City, financial capital of the world.

The tall, bald man held the dollar bill for a few silent moments, his lips pursed, his thin fingers precise and motionless. Then he shrugged, returned the money to his pocket, and took out a cigarette.

He sat a few moments more, smoking the cigarette, and then glanced at his watch. 7:45p.m.

Pulling the coat tighter and buttoning it, he eased open the door and stepped out. Pausing only to lock the car, he moved quickly down the street to the middle of the short block.

This was a neglected street, bypassed by the expansion of the financial district, beckoning no new construction. The buildings here were old commercial buildings—lofts and stores, a lunch counter, a stationery store, a job printer, a messenger service. The storefronts were grimy, and looked forlorn. The bald-headed man couldn't have cared less.

He turned between two commercial entrances and pushed open the grime-encrusted door of a little-used hallway. One faint twenty-watt bulb dangled on a frayed cord from the ceiling. Rubbish lurked in the corners.

Stairs led upward to the right; instead he ducked to the left, under them. He groped for a minute, then clicked on another light. This one showed stairs leading down. They were wooden, covered with metal cleats, and the man made his way down slowly and carefully.

When he reached the basement, he pushed his way into the dim shadows and around. cans piled high with junk and refuse. If the dust on the handles was any indication, these cans had not been emptied since the outbreak of World War II.

Shelves cluttered with miscellaneous junk leaned against the basement walls, and the man walked up to them, and reached under a low one.

A thin, high-pitched whine began and, as though on newly oiled casters, the entire section of shelves rotated smoothly out from the wall.

He reached through the opening now revealed and flicked another switch. Immediately the light at the stairs went out, and a new one beyond came on. He moved quickly through the concealed doorway, and the shelves, servo-mechs whining again, slid back into place.

Quite another sort of man was cautiously easing out of a dark subway tunnel onto a station platform.

He was short, thick-bodied, the muscles standing out on his exposed neck and forearms. The passengers standing and waiting on the subway platform paid no attention to him. He was wearing coveralls, a faded blue denim, and looked not unlike a track worker, one of those men who perennially rove the subway tunnels under the great city looking for and making necessary track repairs.

His hair was dark and grizzled with gray specks. It came low on his brow and, combined with the bushy eyebrows just below, gave him a simian look—the look of a man of low intelligence, but of a certain animal craft and cunning.

Soon a train was rumbling out of the tunnel, its brakes screeching in tortured protest as it came to a halt. The doors slid pneumatically open, and the simian-looking man boarded the train with the other waiting passengers.

The train became an express only a few stops further uptown, and it was only a matter of some ten or fifteen jolting minutes before it was stopping in the 86th Street station.

The short, heavy-set man rose and, shouldering his way past two girls at the door, stepped hastily off the train. The two girls stared past him in indignation. “Did you see that?”

one of them said to the other. She fingered her nose. "I wonder when the last time was, he took a bath."

"People like that they shouldn't let onto these trains," the other girl agreed. The doors slapped shut, and the train started up again. Soon the pillars of the station were a blur, and the dark thick man gone from sight.

When he climbed to the street, the man turned west. He walked in short, pumping strides, his stubby legs covering distance within an amazingly short time. The dark late-model Ford sedan, with only its parking lights on, had no trouble pacing him.

There were two men in the car. They were both young, and looked younger. Each was crewcut, each wore impeccable Ivy League suits, dark and a little conservative for present fashion. One man was a sandy blond; the other had dark hair. That was about the only visible distinction. Both were freshly shaved—and as a matter of fact, the odor of after-shave lotion still lingered within the closed confines of the car. They looked like assistant junior executives, on their way up.

The short man in the coveralls turned south on Madison Avenue, which is one-way for vehicles heading uptown. The driver of the Ford cursed for a moment.

"Don't sweat it," the other said. "We know where he's going. He has to be."

"Right.,

The Ford went a block further west, to Central Park and Fifth Avenue, a one-way street downtown. The light was just turning red, but Dark Hair cut the corner and jabbed the accelerator viciously, and the car skinned through the light.

Ahead, the lights, all timed, began turning green just before the Ford reached each intersection.

They didn't go far, but cut left again on a cross street.

"Blasted one-way streets," Dark Hair muttered.

“Ease off. We’ve got plenty of time,” Sandy Hair answered. “He’s on foot, remember?”

“Yeah, but these streets—these lights! It’s enough to drive ya batty. I gotta go all the way around three sides of the square before I can get there, and meantime—here we sit!”

The light turned green, and the Ford turned left again, up Madison Avenue.

The light at the next block was red and, just as they pulled up to it, Sandy Hair said, “Hey! There he is!”

The short, simian man was just turning the corner ahead of them.

Dark Hair shifted his foot from the brake to the gas and, with tires chirping, swung left through the red light.

Behind them a horn sounded angrily. Ahead, their quarry gave a sudden startled glance over his shoulder, then tucked his head down, hunched his shoulders, and began to run.

The Ford’s headlights held him pinned for a timeless moment and, in that moment, Sandy Hair leaned out his window, gripping a long, thin tube in his tightly clenched fist and his crooked elbow. A wire ran from the tube to under the car’s dash.

The headlights dimmed, then brightened.

A scarlet needle probed into the running man’s back.

He kept on running, his arms pumping, legs churning.

The Ford’s headlights swept beyond him, and then the car was accelerating past him. Its taillights winked once, and then it had made the corner and was gone.

The man was still running. Only his arms jerked up and down erratically, and his feet kept stumbling.

The man was still running as he fell.

A tall, well-muscled man strode back and forth across a lavishly furnished room. His thick blond hair was tousled, and every so often his right hand would rise, as if by its own volition, to push absently through his hair again.

“This inactivity,” he muttered to himself. “It’s got me climbing the walls. It’s got me talking to myself, just to hear my own voice.” And it brought back memories, memories he didn’t want to face, memories of other days, other places, other people. Memories of people lost—and dead.

On his bed were strewn a half-dozen paperback books:

One was a science-fiction novel. Another was a detective mystery. There were two Westerns, a brittle modern comedy, and a war novel. The war novel had been a mistake. Reading—or trying to read—had been a mistake anyway but, after starting the war novel and throwing it down after five pages, it was useless to try to escape into the pages of any of the other books.

He couldn’t quite get interested in the plight of the helpless homesteader against the ruthless cattle baron.

The kooky life of a square kid with Greenwich Village parents didn’t even bring a smile. And the science-fiction novel—all about invaders from the twenty-sixth century—seemed, like the detective novel, to blend too many fantastic memories with too many melodramatic absurdities.

The door opened, and a balding man in livery poked his head in.

“Ah, Mr. Rogers, sir? There seems to be a disturbance in the street. I thought you might...?”

Rogers whirled to face the smaller man, turning so suddenly that he startled him. His face lit with a grin. “What’s happening?”

“Ah, a man, sir. He collapsed on the sidewalk. I don’t know what else...”

Rogers pushed his lithe body past the other and hurried out into the hall, down the heavily banistered stairs.

Still hatless and coatless, he burst out of the front door to see a small group of people clustered in a knot just down the sidewalk.

One of the men was saying, "Looks like a drunk to me."

"No, no," insisted a teenaged girl. "They shot him! I saw it!"

"I didn't hear any shots," sniffed a matronly woman in furs.

"Why doesn't somebody call a doctor?" the girl asked.

"He could be dying!"

"If you ask me, he's just had a few too many," repeated the first man.

"More and more of them drifting over here all the time," the matronly woman stated. "I don't know what we're paying the police for!"

Rogers elbowed his way into the group, and knelt at the man's side. Expertly, he lifted the man's wrist and felt for a pulse. It took him a while to find one; it was weak and erratic.

"Let's have some air, please," he said, addressing the crowd. "Has anyone called the police?"

"Well!" the matronly woman announced. "I'm sure if anyone had, they'd have been here by now!"

"Well, then," Rogers said, looking up over his shoulder, "why don't you get them?"

"Me? Why, I never!"

"Did anyone see what happened?" Rogers asked, ignoring her.

"I did," said the girl. "He was running down the street and this car was chasing him, and a red ray came out of it and it knocked him down!"

“Ahhh, bushwaw,” an older man said in tones ringing with disgust. “She’s been seeing too many James Bond movies, mister. This car, see, it ran the light and some- body honked at it, and that’s all she saw. This guy was blind, staggerin’ drunk, that’s all.”

“Really,” Rogers said. “Strange—I smell no alcohol on him.”

“Yeah? You a doctor or something?”

Rogers ignored him, and began easing the man over, onto his back.

The man’s dark brows grew close together, then relaxed. He gave a racking cough, his mouth opening and closing convulsively. Blood drooled from the corner of his mouth. Those who saw it gasped and drew back.

“Hey!” It was the same man. “You a doctor, or what? What are you doing to that man?” He reached down and plucked at Rogers’ sleeve.

The big blond man’s eyes narrowed momentarily and his muscles tensed. “Keep your hands off me,” he said in a voice that was not loud, but somehow carried its threat effectively. The man drew back hastily.

On the pavement, the dying man’s eyes opened. For a moment his gaze was clear and lucid.

“Cap—Captain America,” he gasped, and then began choking and coughing. “Gotta get to him...”

A peculiar gleam came into Rogers’ eyes then, but no one saw it. The man on the sidewalk said nothing more. His breath seemed to hack once or twice, and then he was still.

Totally still.

Dead.

Manhattan Island is riddled with tunnels. These tunnels serve as the veins and arteries that keep this, the most

important part of New York City, alive. Through small tunnels thousands of miles of wires and cables are laid to bring light and electricity as well as telephone communications to everyone who needs or wants them. Other tunnels carry the gas mains, water, and sewage. But the most important tunnels for many New Yorkers are the subway tunnels, for through these speed the multitude of trains which carry over four million people daily to and from work, and carry many more midday shoppers, evening theatergoers, and people who just need to get from one part of this vast city to another easily and cheaply. The subways are the backbone of the city. Without them—as subway strikes have proven—the city is reduced to chaos, for no city's streets could handle the number of cars that would be necessary for a population of over eight million.

Subways honeycomb Manhattan, for Manhattan is the focus of the city. But few people realize that, although the New York City subway system has not stopped growing, its subterranean network is still greater than that which is in use.

Children who stand gawking at the front of the first car in a subway train sometimes catch glimpses of branching tunnels, shadowy, unlit, tracks rusting. But when they ask their fathers, those worthy gentlemen are wont to scratch their heads and mutter, "I dunno, son. I guess that's just something they never finished."

One of the tunnels they never finished is in Lower Manhattan—in the financial district. It was to be part of a line constructed just before World War I, linking Lower Manhattan with Brooklyn.

The workers in those days were often immigrants, fresh off the ship from the Old Country, and eager for the money said to be lying in the gutters of the cities of America.

They didn't find streets of gold, but they found a bustling, growing city, and one still eager for unskilled labor and the

brawny back.

They poured into the construction trades, wielding picks, shovels and, later, power hammers and other more demanding tools. But in 1912, they used mostly their broad backs, cutting and shoveling through the underpinnings of Manhattan, digging tunnels where the ground was soft enough, resorting to the sledgehammer, the hand-held drill, and dynamite where it wasn't. They were a tough lot, working and cursing, long, hot, dark days, deep under the city streets.

These men were a superstitious lot, often uneducated, steeped more in the lore of Europe and the Old Country than in the science of industrial America. They believed in magic, in vampires, in the Evil Eye—and in trolls.

Trolls are said to be evil ogres who dwell underground, far from the sun's rays. They are terrible creatures, and no man, no matter how toughly muscled, would want to meet up with one.

One day—who can say for sure?—a man, a tunnel digger, working on the new stretch of subway tunnel that would link Manhattan with Brooklyn, saw a troll.

He *said* he saw a troll.

Does it matter? He may have seen only the reflection in a bit of quartz from his own lantern.

Or he may have seen the red gleam of the eyes of a troll.

It made no difference. He told his fellow workers. The story spread. He'd seen a troll.

That section of the subway was blocked off. The city authorities didn't believe in trolls. But they were faced with a working force which did. And those men, those strong, tough, superstitious men, wouldn't work in that tunnel. It was connected with a cavern of the trolls, they said. They didn't want to dig a subway at all. But the authorities—at no small expense—authorized a change in the routing of the

tunnel. They ordered the tunnel head blocked off. They ordered a new tunnel to detour around the abandoned working.

And the construction went on, and the subway line was completed, opened, used, and is still used today by thousands of people.

The abandoned tunnel?

It ran under Liberty Street, coming to a halt near Nassau Street. Right near Liberty Place.

Almost directly under the illegally parked Continental.

CHAPTER 2

WHO IS CAPTAIN AMERICA?

Steve Rogers turned the piece of metal over slowly. He had held it for some minutes now, and it already felt warm from the heat of his hand. It was a dull yellow, and it felt as heavy as lead. Embossed on the smooth side was a seal—the seal of the United States. He turned it over again.

This side was far more brilliant, but rough-textured, the marks of a hacksaw still fresh upon it.

Gold. It was a piece of gold, measuring perhaps three inches square, and less than a half-an-inch thick.

And worth well over one hundred dollars.

Rogers knew what it was, and he knew where it must have come from. But *how*?

He'd engaged the full cooperation of the police, and, when the dead man's body had been searched, they'd found the chunk of gold. That was not all they'd found, of course.

The dead man's back had been carved cleanly open by a knife so thin and razor-sharp that it had torn neither cloth nor flesh. And so hot that it had instantly cauterized the wound. A laser beam—modern science's answer to Buck Rogers' heat rays. It tallied with the girl's description. A ruby-red beam of congruent light, so tightly focused that it can be used to cut through diamonds. Silent and, if properly engineered for a portable unit, quite efficient.

This was clearly not a run-of-the-mill murder.

The man had carried no identification. Rogers had wanted to do a lab job on the clothing himself, but the police had their way, and would even now be going over every particle of grime, grease and dirt imbedded in the clothes, hair, skin, even under the finger nails. Their job would be a thorough one, and they would miss nothing. An autopsy would even reveal the dead man's last meal, if he'd had one within the last four hours. Rogers had to admit that although he had the equipment, he had neither the training nor the time for the sort of exhaustive scientific detective job the boys downtown would be performing.

Instead, he had a more immediate job; the piece of gold.

The United States seal is stamped onto every bar of gold owned by the United States, along with a serial number. When, in the course of balance-of-payments debts, the U.S. transfers its gold to another power, it first erases its seal. It is theoretically impossible for any unauthorized person to possess a gold ingot with the U.S. seal.

Rogers knew this. For many years he had acted as an agent for the United States government. He had undergone special training by the FBI and, later, by U.S. Army Intelligence, during World War II, a time when a great deal of gold was being shipped out of Europe, and into safe-keeping in U.S. depositories. Gold is the monetary base of the world. Its movements are watched more carefully by the agents of the world powers than those of any other single commodity.

And now a strange, squat, brute-featured man had been seeking Captain America—with a piece of gold, obviously cut from a bar of United States gold.

Well, his mission, whatever it had been, had not been entirely in vain. He had found Captain America.

Rogers had already stripped off his outer clothing, and changed into his colorful Captain America uniform. As usual,

when within the town-house mansion in which he now lived, he kept the cowl thrown back on his shoulders. The mask annoyed him, and there were times when he wondered why he bothered with it at all. And at other times he wondered why he even wore the uniform.

And yet he knew. It was not so much that he needed to conceal his identity these days, because for all intents and purposes he had no other identity. Steve Rogers was officially dead, and had been for almost twenty years. Captain America *was* his identity. It was only when he donned the tight-fitting blue uniform with its shield chest-emblem, the red snug-fitting boots, and the heavy, yet pressure-sensitive red-leather gauntlets, that he began to feel real—a complete human being.

Now he reached back and pulled up the cowl, fitting the snug hood over his head, bringing the mask down over the upper half of his face.

His expression seemed to change then. His gaze seemed to become more impelling, his visage more stern. His back straightened, and he seemed to gain additional height. No longer just another man among many, now he was Captain America!

Steve Rogers—Captain America—was a man out of his own time. Some times the memories would come—as they had earlier this day when there were no diversions and no escapes left—but they were painful memories, and not at all the memories of normal men.

Captain America was not, in any sense of the word, a normal man.

Steve Rogers was born on July 9, 1917.

His was a difficult birth and, soon after, his mother had died, leaving him to the care of his father and his seven-

year-old brother.

His father was killed in the war, the next year.

Steve and his brother spent the next ten years with their aunt and uncle, who raised them as though they were their own children.

These were not easy years for Steve Rogers. His older brother, Alan, was, at eighteen, a superbly muscled youth who had excelled at sports and athletic events throughout his childhood. Ruggedly handsome, he was popular throughout high school, being twice class president.

Steve was almost as tall as Alan, but thin, gangling, a weak, nervous child who hid from failure in books, in the vicarious thrills of the adventures of other heroes in other times and lands.

Twice during his childhood, Steve suffered tuberculosis, and spent a year confined to his bed. There were no medicines then that would help; doctors could only advise complete rest. The second time, four years after the first, when he was ten, he was not expected to live.

Steve was bitterly jealous of his older brother, and yet envious and admiring. He idolized Alan, and prized the stories of Alan's exploits he heard from all who knew him.

Yet he was forever in Alan's shadow, always bearing well-meaning friends saying, "Now, if only you were more like your brother..."

Even Uncle Charlie had said it. Uncle Charlie was a testy man, who sometimes resented being saddled with his sister's kids. That Steve! What he cost in doctors' bills alone would raise a normal family.

Then came the panic of 1929—the great stock-market crash that foreshadowed the Depression. Uncle Charlie had been a heavy investor. He was wiped out, broke.

The brothers were separated then and, at the age of twelve, Steve was sent to live in a city-run orphanage.

It was a cruel time and a cruel place. He became the butt of endless jokes, jokes designed to hurt and torment him. He wore glasses now, and was perennially addressed as “Hey, four-eyes!”—sometimes even by the adults who supervised the place.

It was inevitable that he would retreat further into the world of books, away from cruel reality. But Steve Rogers had his pride. He found himself entering his studies as avidly as he had his books of fantasies. And his wide reading paid additional dividends in his larger vocabulary and more sophisticated grasp of subjects. When he graduated from high school, he was an honor student.

During the 1930s, in the midst of the worst depression this country had ever known, college enrollment climbed higher than it had ever been before.

There were no jobs. What else could young men and women do? They stayed in school, and prayed that, by graduation, things would be better.

Steve, with the aid of a state scholarship, went to Columbia, where he studied law. He had read the handwriting on the wall. With Roosevelt’s leadership, the government was moving increasingly into the control of business. While the Justice Department watched zealously for evidences of fraudulent business practices, the Treasury was extending business taxes everywhere. New laws were being passed every day regulating some aspect of business. Business was the demon, the scapegoat, blamed for the horrors of the Depression, and ever more tightly scrutinized and regulated.

Organized crime was growing too. With the death of prohibition, and the end of a lucrative trade in bootlegging organized crime had moved into other prohibited areas—gambling, narcotics, prostitution. Crime—all crime—was on the increase, as rackets men operating loan-shark operations bled jobless men white, and then drove them

into petty crime for money to feed their families and repay the sharks. It was a time of desperation, and of lawlessness.

Rogers could see it very clearly. The legal profession was going to be an increasingly important and valuable career.

Then it was 1940, and Hitler's armies were moving into Poland, France, and the other middle-European countries, and a second world war was starting.

We were not yet at war, yet we were sending millions of dollars' worth of food and merchandise to beleaguered England, and pressure was mounting for America to declare war on Hitler.

Steve Rogers went to his local draft board and tried to enlist.

They almost laughed him out.

A doctor explained it to him, gently.

"Son, you've got a fine mind, and you're heading for a degree in law. Stick with it. Don't try for glory. We may never go to war. But if we do, we need strong, healthy men. With your medical history—forget it."

A recruiting sergeant added, kindly, "This country needs more than fighting men. It needs brains, to keep it running. Make good with what you've got."

And Steve Rogers went quietly home again. But he was not forgotten.

The American sympathizers with Hitler were forming secret bunds, and Black Shirt societies. They created acts of terror, sabotaging munitions plants and arsenals, planting mines aboard ships with relief material destined for England, and launched campaigns of anti-semitism in an attempt to divide our nation and heighten its prejudices.

And in high places, the certainty of war was obvious. Roosevelt held secret meetings with Churchill, assuring him of his support, and an old man named Albert Einstein came

forward to suggest a project which was to be called The Manhattan Project, an attempt to create an atomic bomb.

Other secret projects were set up, among them, *Operation Rebirth*.

Operation Rebirth had several goals, but chief among them was that of rebuilding war-torn bodies into once-more healthy specimens.

The project was headed by the brilliant biochemist, Dr. Erskine. His work with the endocrine system, and chemical body control, was well beyond that of his contemporaries. Only he, of all his colleagues, had fathomed the secrets of the Swiss Dr. Hoffman's 1938 discovery—the mind-controlling LSD-25.

Now he was ready for a human volunteer; a man with a wasted or damaged body, upon which he could test the rejuvenatory powers of his chemicals.

Steve Rogers was one of twenty men approached quietly and efficiently by the FBI for this purpose. He had proven his patriotism in his attempt to enlist in the Army. His body, thin, gangling, scrawny and weak at twenty-four, would make a perfect test case.

The two men wore wide-lapel trench coats, belted at the waist, and wide-brimmed hats. They stood at the door of Steve's boarding-house room, waiting for him to invite them in. When he didn't, only staring at them wordlessly, one of the men tugged at his ear lobe and then reached into his breast pocket with his other hand. He pulled out a leather folder and flipped it open. It revealed a metal shield and a photographic ID card.

"FBI," he said. "Can we talk with you, Rogers?" He nodded inside the room.

Steve stepped back, and they followed him in. He closed and locked the door, then turned to face them. "I'm sorry,

gentlemen, I can't offer you a seat unless you want to use my bed. May I see that identification again, please? And," he nodded at the other man, "yours? I'm afraid I didn't get a good look."

The first man tugged his ear again, then passed over his folder. The second man reached into his coat pocket and brought out his.

Rogers read each one carefully, compared the men with their pictures, and then quietly handed the folders back. "All right," he said. "I'm prepared to believe that you're Richard W. Brown and Michael McInerney, and that you work for the FBI. What do you want to talk to me about?"

Brown fingered his ear again. "You tried to enlist a few months ago."

"That's right. I was turned down—4F."

"How would you like to serve your country anyhow?"

"How? By joining the Justice Department? I haven't got my law degree yet."

"It's not essential. No, this would be something else entirely. I can't tell you anything about it until after you accept except that you'll be something of a guinea pig—and stand a chance of dying."

"Whew! That doesn't sound exactly rewarding. I take it there's more to it than that? Something on the plus side?"

"Yes, it could be quite rewarding for you. If it's successful, that is. I can't make any guarantees at all. All I can tell you is that you'd be serving your country in a way more important than if you sacrificed your life on the battlefield—win, lose or draw."

"What about my career? My degree?"

"For the time being that would be interrupted. However, you would receive special training, at government expense. You'll be working for the government. That would become your career."

Rogers stared around him at the dingy, cramped cubicle he called home. "Well, it can't be much worse than a couple more years of this," he said thoughtfully. "How about my books?"

"You can bring a few of them, that's all," McInerney said, speaking for the first time. His voice sounded deeper than Rogers had expected.

"Do I get a chance to pack?"

Brown smiled. "Take your time. We'll be back in an hour."

They took him in their car, a deep-maroon Hudson sedan, out across the Queensborough Bridge, east into sparsely populated Queens. After more than an hour of driving, they turned up a rutted road leading to a farmhouse.

They didn't stop in front of the house, but continued around back of it, toward the barn. Suddenly, wide doors swung open in the side of the barn and, as the car drove past them, into the barn, Steve had a glimpse of men in army uniforms hastily pulling the doors shut.

This was a barn unlike any barn he'd ever heard of. The floor was concrete, and divided into parking spaces. The Hudson pulled in next to two Fords, painted olive-drab. Beyond, an open elevator ascended to the floor above and out of sight.

Uniformed men, carrying rifles, materialized at each side of the car. Brown and McInerney presented their credentials again, and Brown spoke in a low tone, gesturing toward the back of the car and Rogers.

The uniformed men nodded, and turned away. Brown and McInerney opened the front doors of the car and started to climb out.

Steve reached for his own door handle, and then stopped, nonplussed.

There were no inside handles on the back doors!

McInerney let him out from the outside, however, and soon he was joining them in the elevator.

The second floor was different again. Completely furnished with modern hospital fittings, smelling even of hospital smells, it seemed totally out of place, here in a barn.

But it was here, on this second floor, that Steve was to live for the next week.

The tests they gave him made his previous Army physical seem like play. They took samples of nearly every part of his body. There were blood tests, skin scrapings, even a spinal tap, for which he was, mercifully, fully unconscious. They fitted electrodes to his shaven skull, and ran elaborate electro-encephalographic tests. There was one whole day when he ate only a strange exotic-tasting purple paste—and on the next day, nothing at all, during which he was subjected to a battery of X-ray shots.

There was no use asking what it was all about. Most of the people who conducted the tests—pretty nurses and serious-faced young doctors—quite cheerfully admitted that they had no idea themselves of the purpose to which these tests would be put. They did admit, however, that Steve was not the only one undergoing them. And once he had a glimpse of a man swathed in bandages who, he was told, had been badly burned.

Then, exactly a week after he had been brought to the place, he was taken away again. Once again he climbed into the red Hudson with Brown and McInerney, but this time there was someone else sharing the back seat.

He was a handsome, graying man, wearing the uniform of a brigadier general. Brown introduced him. “Rogers, this is

General Anderson. He's in charge of the project, and he'll tell you something of what you're in for."

Steve Rogers felt like a stray mongrel in his corner of the car. They were shunting him back and forth, treating him like a laboratory hamster. What had he let himself in for?

The general began to tell him.

CHAPTER 3

REBIRTH!

“Rogers,” General Anderson said quietly, as the car began its trip back to Manhattan, “if you could change anything about yourself, what would it be?”

“Be, sir? You mean like smarter, bigger, tougher, like that?”

“Like that, yes.”

“Well, I suppose every man who’s something less than physically perfect wishes he had a new body.”

“Yes, exactly. And would *you* like a new body?”

Rogers turned to stare openly at the general. “Sir? I don’t get the joke.”

Anderson smiled. “No joke. Seriously, we are in a position to offer you, well, not a new body, but—a better one.

“As you know, you were selected to be among our guinea pigs for a new experimental project. That project is officially known as *Operation Rebirth*.

“If the experiment is successful, you will grow and develop a new, stronger, tougher, bigger body. And not only that: Your body will be able to withstand extraordinary punishment. Wounds should heal in half the usual time, or less. You should be almost entirely disease resistant. You’ll be able to function over a wider heat range—from numbing

cold to blistering heat. Your metabolism will be capable of being speeded up at will. Sound good?"

Rogers nodded. "And—if the experiment is not successful?"

"I won't mince words with you, son. It could kill you."

The Hudson's headlights picked out the sights of shabbily dressed men leaning against storefronts, others sitting or sprawling in doorways. Always nearby was the twisted brown paper bag, a bottle poking slyly out. Overhead, the Second Avenue El trains rumbled by, their vibration visibly shaking the rows of support pillars rising from the curbs.

This was the Lower East Side, a dismal slum that would not have changed appreciably long after the El tracks had been removed, and modern street lights installed.

Here the homeless bums, winos, the human derelicts lurked and lived. Here too, rats the size of cats fearlessly invaded shabby apartments to steal a starving family's last remnants of food.

It was an anonymous place, the sort of area in which anything might go, because its denizens were an incurious lot, who accepted within their midst every kind of underworld scum. If one wanted privacy, there was no better place than among the teeming populace of the Lower East Side.

Brown swung the Hudson off onto a side street, and up to the curb. This street was a typical mixture. Side by side sat tenements, a rundown apartment building, a deserted warehouse with crude obscenities chalked on its doors; and, next to that, a dusty curio shop—the kind where one can buy or sell anything, few questions asked.

Brown remained in the car, while McInerney, letting Rogers and General Anderson out, led them directly across the sidewalk to the entrance of the curio shop. A bum, filthy,

unshaven, reeking of alcohol, was sprawled across the doorway.

"Out the way, you," McInerney snarled loudly. Then, in a whisper Rogers barely caught, he added, "Everything okay?"

The burn opened a surprisingly clear blue eye, winked and nodded, and then grumbled, "Okay, mister, okay." He sidled off the step.

McInerney pushed into the shop, stepping aside to let the other two past, and then closed and locked the door. A bell over its sill jingled.

"Coming, gentlemen, *coming*," called a querulous voice, and from the dim interior shadows of the shop stepped a huddled old woman.

"I believe you were expecting us," the general said.

"I expect nobody," she replied. Her hand brushed against her long full skirts, and then held an ugly short-muzzled automatic. "Your identification, please. Place it on the counter, then step back."

Each of the three men in turn surrendered his papers, Rogers passing over his expressly issued photo-card.

The woman switched on a bright light which caught them in their faces. Rogers blinked and then closed his eyes. The light was blinding. Then it was off, and it was like a pressure being removed.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Shall we proceed?" She turned and started toward the back of the shop. McInerney scooped up the sets of identification papers and passed one to the general. "I'll keep yours," he told Rogers. "It wouldn't do you any good when you come out, anyway." With firm strides, the woman led them to a back stair, and up to a second-floor hall. Boxes, most of them open and full of old appliances, tea services, and other household oddments of other eras, lined and littered the length of the hall. Midway down, the woman motioned them to a stop, and squeezed

between two stacks of boxes. Next, a crack of light appeared on the wall. The crack widened, and became a narrow open door.

Rogers tried to remember the layout of the building as he'd seen it from the outside. This hallway should be running down one side of the narrow shop. And the doorway was on the outside. That meant—she was leading them into the apparently abandoned warehouse next door.

Steve Rogers was to know that warehouse intimately, for he spent four weeks there, sometimes confined to his bed on the third floor, sometimes prowling the fourth-floor lab with Dr. Erskine, sometimes chatting with the security men on the second floor. It was only the first floor he never saw. And that, he had been told, was sealed off from the upper floors, a dusty, musty area that looked exactly like what it was—part of an abandoned warehouse.

The upper floors of the warehouse constituted one of the most advanced laboratories in the United States. Under the direction of Dr. Anton Erskine, pioneer research was being done into the biochemical areas of human physiology. Although Dr. Erskine delegated much of the work to his assistants, he alone held the key knowledge that crystallized their findings. “It is very simple,” he had once told General Anderson. “I can commit everything to paper, and sooner or later the wrong man will read it and steal it. Or I can keep it all locked in my memory, where I know it is safe. Eh?”

Steve Rogers had been analyzed. His entire body chemistry had been analyzed. The very genetic structure of his chromosomes had been broken down and catalogued. Dr. Erskine had already unlocked the secret of DNA and RNA—a secret which science would not penetrate again for two decades.

Now Steve Rogers' body structure would be *changed*. It meant days of careful preparation. Everything followed the necessary sequence.

First his bones were strengthened. This was done in two different ways. The first was a series of operations on his arms and legs, in which stainless steel-slotted tubes were inserted within the marrow of his bones, adding enormous rigidity. Next, while his diet was heavily weighted with calcium, a series of chemical treatments built up the very structure of his bones, strengthening them, making them less brittle, more resistant to impact, and capable of carrying greater weight. During this period, Steve felt awkward and ungainly, like a wobbly colt just learning to walk. He had gained three inches in height, and his shoulders and chest had swelled. Yet he was underweight, skinny, and his new bones made it only more obvious.

Next came the muscle build-up.

Each day they injected him with chemicals, fed him enormous meals, rich in proteins—eggs, cheese, steak—and put him through wearying calisthenics. One part of the third floor had been fitted up as a gym, and each morning a burly man with little hair and a mashed ear would lead him through a series of torments designed to exhaust him completely. First, twenty laps around the gym and a workout on the chinning bars. Then the rowing machine. Then a nap and a meal. Then another twenty laps and pushups. And so on, into, it seemed, eternity.

He lost track of time and of the days. There were no windows in this building, and the hours passed in blurs.

But one day he walked past a mirror, and saw a stranger staring back at him. He paused, and looked wide-eyed at the sweaty Greek god in the glass. He looked at his heavy shoulders, the broad chest, thick biceps and triceps, the piston-like forearms, the supple, tapering waist, powerful thighs, and muscled calves. It was like looking at a total

stranger. And yet it was he—Steve Rogers. He shook his head in amazement.

“You’re doing fine, son,” Dr. Erskine told him the next morning. “You’re living proof that my program can be successful. Can you see Hitler’s face, when we throw an entire *army* of guys like you at him?”

Rogers smiled, modestly. “It doesn’t seem real, sir. I guess I just haven’t had time to accept it. I’ve been so tired, so exhausted lately.”

“Of course. We’re speeding up the development of your body. It takes more food—energy—more rest and sleep. All that meat on you didn’t come from nowhere!”

“I’ve been worrying about that, sir. Are you sure it’ll stay? I mean, if I ever go back to a more normal life?”

“Don’t worry. What it all boils down to is your genetic pattern. Every cell in your body had imprinted in it the whole pattern of what you are, what you should look like. Theoretically, given one cell from your body, we could reconstruct you. This genetic pattern is what controls what you are—whether you have blue eyes or brown, how tall, how heavy you’ll be—everything.

“What we’ve done is to *change* your genetic pattern progressively. We’ve told your body that it shouldn’t look like it did—but rather the way it does now. Give it a normal amount of food and rest, and it will keep the new pattern. Don’t worry.”

“Is that all there is to it, sir?”

“No, we have a few more things to take care of. We want to give you a wider operating range. We want to give you faster reflexes—an altogether faster metabolism, in fact. And we want to increase your tolerances to heat and cold beyond the human norm. This will be the most dangerous part of our program because, you see, we’ll be tampering with aspects outside human normality. Up to now we’ve just

shuffled your genes around within normal human limits. Now we'll be attempting something nature has never tried."

Rogers felt a chill come over him, a chill that had nothing to do with the perspiration still wet on his body from the early morning workout.

"You mean, sir, that I still stand a chance to lose all this? To come this far, and...?"

"Want to stop now?"

Rogers felt his face heat. "No sir. I volunteered for the whole program, and I'll stick to it."

"Good."

The next twenty-four hours were the strangest Rogers had ever known. He was strapped into his bed, and given an injection.

It seemed only a pinprick-moment after the needle had been withdrawn from his arm that his sensations began to turn rubbery. His eyes were still open, but the room seemed to shift and recede into a vague combination of colors that clashed, and disturbed him. So he let his lids close, and a warm, rich blackness swept over him, all but drowning him, until he replaced it with new visions.

From some faraway place, he heard the drone of voices, sounding muffled and doleful, like a recording suddenly slowed to half its speed; deep drawling voices. They spoke words, but not in any way intelligible to him.

The voices disturbed him, so he willed them to stop, and spun them away from him. He watched them recede like distant comets into the black infinity of space. Then he somersaulted himself one hundred and eighty degrees, and set off in the opposite direction.

He was hallucinating, he knew that. In one astonishingly lucid portion of his brain he was totally aware of everything going on, of the voices in the room, and what they were

saying (it would be filed away in his memory to be taken out and examined later), of his own strange reaction, and of the vast vista of wonderment opening up before him.

He felt like a child, bright-eyed and eager, while, coldly aloof but not unfriendly, his superego sat upon his shoulder, observing, recording, making a note of everything, interfering in nothing.

What did it all mean? It didn't have to mean anything at all. Experience was its own justification. Being was being.

Later, when he described his experiences, or attempted to describe them, to Dr. Erskine, the man shook his head wearily and said, "Perhaps you have undergone a transcendental experience. Or perhaps you just went temporarily mad."

"Mightn't it all be the same thing, sir?"

"I don't know. I'm an old man. I've never fully accepted Freud. Jung I can't understand. I just dabble with chemicals. I don't know."

And Rogers had felt sorry for him; sorry for any man who could do so much, and still not know.

Gradually the hallucinations ceased and he found himself returning to his own body. Yet it was a different body, different from both his first, scrawny body, and from the new physical perfection of the second.

The difference was that of *control*.

For the first time in his life, he felt truly aware of his body's functions and abilities. He caught the sound of his heart pumping, and then the *feel* of it. He followed the surges of blood throughout his entire circulatory system, and in the process became aware of his nervous system—that vast communications network of nerve ganglia. He followed the autonomous functions back into a portion of his brain he had never known before, connecting it as he went

with his ductless gland system, with its manufacture, control, and release of body and brain chemicals and hormones. Here, in this newly discovered part of his brain, he found the origin of the messages which controlled his heartbeat, connected the smell of food with the salivation glands in his mouth, and performed all the other bodily functions normally beyond the awareness and control of a human being.

And with his awareness came control.

He found himself speeding then slowing, his heartbeat. He deliberately increased the amount of adrenalin in his bloodstream. He manipulated his optical nerves, and tightened his optical muscles to correct his nearsightedness. Bit by bit, he took a tour of inspection of his own body, making corrections as he went, easing out malfunctions here, tuning up a little there, until he not only knew exactly how every aspect of his body functioned, but had put it all into perfect operating order.

Then he fell asleep.

When he awoke, he felt more refreshed than he had ever felt before in his life. He was puzzled for a long moment. Then memory came flooding back over him. He lay still, his eyes closed again, until he felt he had digested it all, and understood it.

He no longer felt that total *control*—that tuned awareness of his body. Yet he knew that he remained in control, if only subconsciously. The injection he had been given—he didn't know what it was—had placed him in that lucid state in which he had checked himself out so thoroughly. The drug was exhausted now, and he would be on his own. But enriched.

He felt amazed at all he had learned about himself. He had known, in a vague and meaningless sort of way, that

the human body has great reserves of strength and power which it normally never uses, but the knowledge had never meant much to him; he had felt too far removed from the reality of it.

He had gone to a show once, where a hypnotist had put a volunteer into a trance, told him to become as stiff as a board, and then had demonstrated the man's amazing reserve of strength by positioning his head on one chair, his heels on another, while directing other volunteers to sit and stand on his unsupported torso.

It meant something now. Steve Rogers knew that if the occasion ever arose, he had a great reserve of power he could call upon and will into use. He knew too that he could speed or slow his reflexes at will. There would be a price paid, of course, for each feat of strength and will. The energy needed would have to come from somewhere. He could deplete his body badly if he didn't restore it with additional sleep and food—the sleep to rid his body of toxins, the food to refuel it.

He pulled himself upright and sprang to his feet. Now he could truly understand and appreciate the new body he had been given. Now he could exult in it!

CHAPTER 4

NAZI TREACHERY

The experiment was pronounced a total success.

That evening, the lab staff joined Rogers, General Anderson and Dr. Erskine in a celebration.

"We know we can do it now," Dr. Erskine announced. "Operation Rebirth is a complete success. One by one, we shall transform our nation's fighting men into the proudest examples of humanity the world has ever known. That should stop Hitler and his talk of an Aryan Master Race!"

There were cheers and, when he could be heard, General Anderson asked, "Will you be setting your formulas down on paper now, Doctor?"

"No, I still think they will remain safer in my head. However, I shall supervise the mass production of the necessary chemicals, which can be administered without my help. We'll be closing down all our operations here except for the lab, which we will be expanding to cover all floors. I expect that within a month we will be turning out enough chemicals to treat twenty men a day."

One man seemed less pleased than the others at this news. It was the little man who had been Steve's gym trainer. "What about me, Doc? What'll I do?"

"I'm afraid our need for you is ended, Max," Dr. Erskine said. "But you're a good trainer. I'm sure you can find as much work as you ever did."

The little pug-eared man's lips curled. "Like that, eh? Pick 'em up, throw 'em down. Well, I got other plans!" With that, he whipped out a short-barreled revolver.

"Okay, Doc, you're coming with me. We got business together—elsewhere."

Max moved up behind Erskine, and began urging him toward the door. As Steve watched in astonishment, he felt his stomach tighten.

"What do you think you're doing?" Dr. Erskine was protesting.

"I know what I'm doing. *Heil Hitler!*" Max shouted.

Suddenly the old doctor whirled, turning on Max and grappling with him. "No," he shouted. "For Hitler, never!"

There were four shots, muffled by the doctor's body, but loud in the small room.

"If I can't take you, nobody gets you," Max screamed. And Erskine's dead body slumped to the floor.

For the swift duration of the scene, Steve Rogers had forgotten who and what he now was.

But Dr. Erskine's violent death galvanized him. He lunged at the little man near the door.

"No, no! Keep back! I'll shoot!" Max cried. Then he triggered his two remaining shots directly at Rogers.

Steve felt the impact of both bullets, but, reaching the Nazi assassin, he lifted him high over his head, whirled him about, and then threw him to the floor, where the man collapsed, unconscious.

He was about to pick the unconscious man up and batter him against the wall, when his rage began to ebb, and he began thinking rationally again. Slowly he shook his head. "Well," he said. "I stopped him. But too late to do any good."

“Who would’ve thought it?” General Anderson was saying. “Max, of all people—a Nazi spy.”

“He must’ve been waiting to get his hands on either the chemical or the formula,” one of the lab technicians said.

“When he realized this would be his last chance, he had no choice.”

“And now—Dr. Erskine is dead,” Anderson said. “Dead. And so is our program. With that man has perished the secret of a whole new biochemical science.” He glanced over at Rogers, now standing uncertainly near the door. “My God, man! You’ve been wounded!”

Rogers shook his head. “Flesh wounds, sir. The bullets went right through my thigh without doing any real damage. I’ve stopped the bleeding, and nipped any infection. I’ll be fully healed in a couple of days.”

General Anderson stared at him. “You—you’re not joking, are you?”

“No, sir.”

“You can really do all those fantastic things Dr. Erskine was hoping for?”

“Well, sir, I haven’t tried everything yet.”

“But enough. We know enough! This is something.

Maybe we can salvage more from this program than I thought!”

Thus was Captain America born.

General Anderson explained it to him when he brought Steve Rogers his new uniform.

“You’re the only one we’ve got—the only man successfully taken through the entire Operation Rebirth program. You were intended to be only the first of many. Now you’re it. You’re the one man we have, and we need to utilize you as effectively as we can.

“We’re giving you an alter ego, a symbolic identity. When you don this uniform, your face will be masked, and you’ll no longer be a private citizen. You’ll be America herself. You’ll be *Captain America*. You’ll give our country a rallying point, you’ll be a youthful, dynamic Uncle Sam. And you’ll give old Adolf something to think about.”

“I don’t get it, sir. Why can’t I just be Steve Rogers, an American? Why the gaudy costume, the mask?”

“I told you why, Steve. We want you to be a symbol that every man can identify with. We want men all over this country to feel that beneath that mask it could be *them*, it could be *any* American.

“But there’s another reason. You’re going to be in a dangerous position. You represent a new kind of man, and we’re not going to let it be known that Dr. Erskine died. If the Nazis are keeping track of Operation Rebirth, we want them to think it has been fully successful. Perhaps they’ll think that Captain America is not one, but many men. But in any case, you’re going to be a target—a walking, living breathing target, for every Nazi spy and saboteur in the country. That is, you will be *as Captain America*. As Steve Rogers, you’ll be unknown, and you’ll have some breathing space. If necessary, we can curtail your appearances as Captain America, and all those Nazis will be running around in circles, wondering just who and where you are.”

Steve nodded. “I guess I better try this thing on.”

In the weeks that followed, Captain America, garbed in his memorable red, white and blue uniform, armed with a high-alloy titanium-steel shield, blazed into action all over the East Coast of the United States.

When saboteurs attacked a munitions dump, Captain America materialized out of the night, his shield deflecting their bullets, to overwhelm and frighten them away.

When the Nazi Bund held a secret meeting to hand down high-level sabotage orders from overseas, Captain America appeared in their midst, totally disrupting the meeting, and seizing their ringleaders.

When the infamous Red Skull, Hitler's much-feared personal agent of terror, appeared in the United States, it was Captain America who confronted him, opposing his paranoid ruthlessness with his own courage and strength. It would not be their last confrontation,* but it set the tone for the outcome of those which followed, as Captain America scored triumph after triumph over his macabre Nazi nemesis.

Each appearance reinforced the newly growing legend. At first newspapers were skeptical, and editorials asked dubiously, "Who is this masked and colored figure who appears to be straight from the pages of mythology?" But then photographs, often blurred and underexposed, began to appear, and finally a newsreel photographer caught the first live footage of Captain America in action, as he dashed repeatedly into a blazing factory to rescue unconscious workers. That film appeared in theaters throughout America, and brought home for the first time to Mr. and Mrs. America the reality of this fantastic man.

Then came Pearl Harbor, and war.

Steve Rogers became Pvt. Steve Rogers, as Captain America followed the war overseas.

And he acquired a sidekick, teenaged Bucky Barnes, an orphan like himself, who had managed to become adopted by Rogers' company while still in training, stateside. Barnes was a tough youth, a boy who had grown up in the same Lower East Side slums where Rogers had gained his new identity. Fast-witted and clever, the boy was quick at adapting himself to conditions as he found them. When the war began, he decided to join the army, although his actual

age was all too apparent. But Bucky wouldn't take "no" for an answer, and soon he was living on base.

The two formed a strange friendship for, while Bucky admired Steve Rogers' superb physique, he was also envious, and forever trying to outdo the bigger man. It was in the process of attempting a practical joke on Steve that Bucky found his Captain America uniform in his footlocker. The footlocker had been locked at the time, but locks had never stood in Bucky's way.

"I got somethin' on ya, Cap," he said, when he was able to draw Rogers off alone. "I found ya monkey suit."

It was blackmail, of course, and initially Rogers resented it. But he had a second costume made and, in their free time, he began training Bucky to work as his partner.

Fortunately, the boy was agile and a fast learner. They practiced acrobatic tricks, and coded maneuvers. The boy was small and fast. It helped.

But not enough.

It was late in the war, in early 1945, and the two were stationed at an experimental army base, where captured V-II "buzzbombs"—small, droning German rocket-planes filled with high explosives—were being examined. Dressed in army fatigues, they were strolling by the empty field where the buzzbombs were lined up on their carts.

"Boy, wouldja look at those babies," Bucky said. "Murderous, huh, Cap?"

"But surprisingly ineffectual," Rogers replied. "They're a last-ditch attempt of Hitler's to terrorize the British."

Frost had settled over the ground, and a low moon gleamed dully on the dark-colored rocket planes. Bucky blew on his hands and rubbed them together. "Ol' Adolf is really stickin' his neck out, huh?"

Rogers nodded. Then, suddenly, he raised his arm and stopped Bucky short. "I saw something move over there—in

the shadows under one of the planes.”

“Hey! You mean someone’s messin’ around with ‘em?” Bucky whispered. “They’re all duds, aren’t they?”

“No, they’re not. They’re intact, and deadly. The wrong move, and they could blow this whole base sky high!”

“Holy cow, Cap. We gotta do somethin’!”

“Right!”

Quickly, silently, they separated, and began moving in on the grouped rocket planes from opposite sides.

Rogers was ducking under a low tail section when, suddenly, he heard Bucky’s shout. “Here he is, Cap! I gottim!”

Then, in the next instant, the whole world seemed to be aflame, as the bright searing torch of a rocket exhaust leapt from one of the planes.

It was starting to move!

Quickly Rogers ran for it, and jumped up onto the stubby wing. He had to stop it! This was a fully armed bomb, and if it struck anything, it would go off!

“Cap!” Bucky shouted. Rogers shot a startled look at his partner on the opposite wing.

“Jump!” he shouted back. “Jump off! I’ll take care of it!”

But now the rocket plane was rolling down the deserted tarmac at express-train speed, and to jump would be fatal.

“Hold on,” he shouted. “We’ll see if we can steer this thing!”

The nose had lifted now, the weight of the two men shifting the balance of the plane back on its wheeled cart. Suddenly, they were airborne.

The plane had control surfaces, but no way to reach them. It was all Steve Rogers could do to hold on against the buffeting airstream.

But there was hope. Up ahead, moonlight glinted off the choppy waves of the North Atlantic. If they could drop the plane's nose low enough, they could drop off into the water, and the plane itself would blow up harmlessly at sea.

Rogers shouted his instructions to Bucky over the high-pitched whine of the rocket engine, and the roar of the airstream.

Painfully, inch by inch, they crawled forward on the rocket's short fuselage, until once again they had changed its balance and sent it into a slow dive toward the water.

Then, before Rogers could act, Bucky screamed. "I'm slipping!"

The boy didn't have Steve Rogers' prodigious physical stamina. His fingers, numbed by the intense cold, had lost their grip. Frantically, Steve tried to reach back for him, but too late. Bucky's body caught at his waist in the tail assembly, hooked between the fuselage and the rocket engine atop the thick rudder.

Steve tried to move back to him, to grab him, free him.

But then the icy surface of the Atlantic was speeding up toward them, and he knew it was too late. Desperately, he kicked loose, flinging himself away from the diving rocket. Instinctively, he curled himself into a tight ball, scant seconds before he hit the water.

It smashed at him, felt like falling four stories to a hard concrete sidewalk, and yet it didn't destroy him, but cushioned the blow. He sank down, down, far beneath the surface, consciousness all but gone.

From a great distance, a second blow struck him, and a thick red haze came through his closed eyes. Then he was unconscious.

The next chapter in Steve Rogers' life is the most fantastic, and yet, paradoxically, the one he can remember

least about.

Because for the next twenty years, Steve Rogers was in a state of suspended animation.

Scientists are only now groping their way toward an understanding of suspended animation. They know that some animals—certain lizards, for instance—simply cease functioning when the temperature drops below a certain point, and yet revive, healthy, the following spring. Lizards are “cold blooded,” and their internal temperatures are the same as the temperature of their surroundings. But even warm-blooded mammals can slow their metabolisms and hibernate for long cold winters, surviving on far less food than customarily.

The goal that scientists have been seeking is that of “quick freezing” a live human being into a state in which his life is suspended. He is not dead, but neither is he alive. His body processes will continue, but at a vastly reduced rate. His heart might pump once a month—or once a year. If he is kept in cold and sterile surroundings, a person thus “quick frozen” might theoretically survive for centuries, his tissues in perfect preservation, awaiting only revival to be alive and healthy once more.

Steve Rogers was no longer an average human being. His body was capable of feats no other human being could duplicate. And he had a strong will to survive.

He was submerged in the freezing waters of the North Atlantic, somewhere off the coast of Newfoundland. He had no air, and the water was rapidly sapping the heat from his body.

His subconscious took over. It slowed his metabolism to the barest crawl, reducing his need for oxygen to that which was already within his lungs, and allowing him to become the first human being ever frozen into a state of suspended animation.

He was caught, frozen, in an ice floe, until at last, by several strange quirks of fate, he was freed, and found by a group of superheroes who called themselves The Avengers.**

No other man could have survived so fantastic a voyage through time. And no other man could feel so displaced by time.

He was a man twenty years in his own future. By rights he should be nearly fifty years old—nearly twice the age of his fellow Avengers. Yet his mind and his body were not yet thirty. The world had changed; not he.

When the Avengers had brought him back to New York with them and insisted that, as an honored hero of the past, he join them, he felt a sort of melancholy homesickness for his own time and world. Bucky—dead now—a bratty kid sometimes, too given to ignoring commands and making his own decisions, but plucky, full of courage and resourcefulness. He would miss Bucky like a younger brother. And what of his older brother, Alan, with whom he had lost touch so many years ago, while he was still in school? Aunt and uncle dead; he'd checked. And General Anderson, killed in action in the Pacific. No one was left; no one whom he'd known in the old days; no one who'd shared his secret.

Steve Rogers? Steve Rogers was officially dead now; had been declared missing and presumed killed in action, along with Bucky Barnes. Those who had known he was Captain America were not available to make the correlation, or to tell a troubled world what had happened to that fighting symbol of freedom.

It was a big war, a war for which new words had to be invented, like “snafu”—“situation normal, all fouled up”—and “fubar”—“fouled up beyond all repair”. It was a war of catastrophic mistakes as well as smashing victories. It was a

war which had mobilized the armies of half the globe, and in which logistics—the science of moving necessary supplies—played an important role. Sometimes the bookkeeping wasn't what it should have been; forms were misfiled, and at least one entire platoon was misplaced and misrouted by a flunky in the Pentagon.

Captain America had disappeared, and Steve Rogers was presumed dead.

For twenty years.

* But that's another story, and one we told in *Tales of Suspense* #s 65, 66, 67, 68; May, June, July, August, 1965.—Stan Lee, encyclopedic editor.

** For the full story, you'll have to lay your hands on *The Avengers Magazine* #3, March, 1964.—Smilin' Stan Lee.

CHAPTER 5

WITH THE AVENGERS

Time had not stood still while Steve Rogers slept his dreamless sleep. One war ended, and other, smaller ones began. The cause of freedom was not settled, and the lines that separated right from wrong were forever blurred on that day the Atomic Bomb took its first lives in Hiroshima.

The hemline went up, then down, and then began a climb which was not to stop even at the knee. Dresses ballooned, then tightened into slender sheaths. Women's hair became boyishly short, then bouffantly teased, and then returned to the shoulder-length "natural" look, while men's hair descended for the first time in a century. Cars got bigger and then smaller, while air travel shortened the distance between New York and London to six hours, and threatened to reduce it even more dramatically within the next decade. Big boxes that received radio programs grew into tiny miniatures, while little television screens swelled in size and exploded into color. Records increased their diameter from ten inches to twelve inches, and their playing time from six minutes to thirty-six.

For those who have lived through this era of fantastic growth and change—the "post war" era—it all seems quite dull and inevitable. Even space travel seems commonplace today, and the launchings rarely excite news as they did only a year or two ago.

But for Steve Rogers, this new, affluent, exciting America was a more foreign land than any he'd ever known. He had hardly been prepared for the sight of the strangely costumed people who greeted him upon his awakening, but they were only a foretaste of what was to come.

These people, the Avengers, were a strange lot, by any era's standards.

Take Iron Man, for instance. He was not truly a man of iron, but a man who wore a suit of flexible steel armor, full of transistorized microcircuits, powered by a miniature power-pack. His armor was an exoskeleton which not only provided protection from attack, but quadrupled his strength as well.

Then there was Giant Man, and his partner, the Wasp. He was a biochemist who had stumbled onto a chemical which would allow its user to compact his molecules and reduce his size—or, in reversing the process, expand to giant-size. He was not to have an easy time of his size-control, however, and he and the Wasp, who was his fiancée, had retired from the Avengers soon after.

The final member was by far the most impressive: Thor, God of Thunder. Rogers had found him least easy to understand or accept. Even after Thor had told him that the gods of legend were indeed superhumans who had once walked the face of the earth, and that he had returned when a mortal had found his hammer and enchanted him into his earthly personification, Steve remained torn between awe and skepticism and was relieved when Thor, too, became less active an Avenger.

But these Avengers had saved him, and accepted him into their midst, and for this he was grateful. For them he was himself a modern-day legend, and in a way he was indirectly responsible for them.

Captain America had been the first of the costumed crime-fighters now so familiarly known as "superheroes." At

the time, his uniform had been developed for patriotic and symbolic reasons, and for practical reasons as well. It was simple and effective, since the snug-fitting knitted cloth did not hamper freedom of movement, or offer folds to snag against rough edges, while the boots and gauntlets were tough enough to take the heavy wear demanded of them.

But Captain America's appearance had set off a chain reaction and, in his wake, other men appeared, some to fight by the side of law and order, others to prey as criminals upon the unwary, each wearing a useful, functional costume, but using the costume chiefly for its psychological effect. When a man donned a mask and costume, he became a more fearful figure, for all his new anonymity.

There was a power in the unknown. People feared that which they could not understand.

The science of the fifties, like the fallout of the forties, helped develop more of these costumed superheroes. Some found their roles accidentally, others by design. Drawing upon the space-age technology of printed circuits and micro-miniaturization, such men as Iron Man were able to carve out whole new roles for themselves in the ever-increasing fight against crime within the nation, and foreign threats from without.

It was all enough to make Rogers feel way behind his time.

The Avengers had fished him out of a gulf stream in which his block of ice had melted, and aboard their ship. When they sailed into New York, it was a harbor and a city he had never seen before.

As they approached land, Rogers, his army fatigues long since in tatters and gone, wearing only his Captain America costume, and a heavy topcoat over it, marveled at the sights. Before them was a great bridge that stretched across the harbor, linking Staten Island with the southern tip of

Brooklyn. It had yet to open, but its span was complete. It looked longer than the Golden Gate Bridge—and was.

An expressway paralleled their route along the Brooklyn shore and Steve stared, entranced, at the sleekly futuristic cars that sped along it.

Lower Manhattan, as they approached it, looked different too. The skyline was taller, and there were many buildings which looked like long slim boxes upended.

They moved slowly up the East River, passing under the Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Williamsburg bridges, passing close by the United Nations Building. In quiet tones, Iron Man explained the U.N., and its function since the end of World War II.

Then they had disembarked at a special pier, and were in a taxi, heading crosstown for a quiet town house on the Upper East Side.

Giant Man, now normal-sized, explained it to Steve: “You see, Cap, the house is owned by Tony Stark. He’s a wealthy inventor who’s been responsible for a lot of our top defense work. Iron Man works for him, and talked him into donating the place to us as a headquarters. It gives us a good central meeting place, and it’s just the place to put you up. Nobody else is living there now, except for Jarvis, the man who takes care of things. Unobtrusive; you’ll find him easy to get along with. He likes to pretend he’s a British-type butler. Don’t ever let him know I told you he’s from Flatbush.”

And all too quickly, Steve found himself ensconced within the Stark mansion, a permanent resident.

It was no lark, being an Avenger. If the going had been rough before, it was no easier now. He had stepped into a world infinitely more complicated, a world in which science and technology played an increasingly important role. Free moments Rogers spent in the main branch of the Public

Library at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street, just trying to bone up.

Then, while Steve was in the midst of an important case, Thor disappeared, saying only that he must attend a Trial of the Gods, and Giant Man, Wasp, and Iron Man began to look longingly back on the days when their problems were only those of other ordinary people. They began auditions for new Avengers to replace them.* As the Wasp put it, “Why don’t *all* of us take a leave of absence? Everybody deserves a vacation sometime. I—I’d like to lead a normal life for a while; just like anybody else!”

When Rogers returned from his mission, he found himself the leader of a new outfit. Gone were Thor, Giant Man, Wasp, and Iron Man—the few friends he’d made in this new life. Instead he had under his command Hawkeye, an archer whose unusual arrows had the uncanny way of always hitting their mark, and a pair of young mutants, a brother and a sister, Pietro and Wanda, better known as Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch. Their names were appropriate since, as Quicksilver, Pietro could move at speeds which made him only a blur, while Wanda’s scarlet witchery consisted of a strange hex power which manipulated the laws of chance in favor of those she sided with, and against their enemies.

The new Avengers had less individual power, and it seemed strange to some onlookers that the man with the least obvious superpowers, Captain America, should be their leader. Yet his experience was far greater and, as their leader, he melded them into a functioning team—an organized team that the old Avengers had never been.

The Avengers were often faced with challenging assignments in the months that followed, and those assignments shaped and tested them, building the confidence of each in his fellow teammates, and developing their maturity as Avengers.

But they didn't spend all their time together. That would be impossible. Just now Wanda and Pietro were in their home country for a visit, while Hawkeye was pursuing a solo mission.

And Steve Rogers, Captain America, faced his newest problem alone.

Five minutes after midnight, a patrol car drove down Liberty Street. As it passed the entrance to Liberty Place, the policeman at the wheel gestured at the dark bulk of the Continental parked half on the sidewalk, and slowed his car.

"It's been there since early evening," he said. "Ticket it?"

"Might as well."

The car stopped, reversed, and drew up at the neck of the narrow street. The patrolman in the passenger seat climbed wearily out, and walked without haste to the Continental.

As the man behind the wheel watched, the patrolman used a small pencil-flash on the car's license plate, paused, then flashed it again. Then he pulled something else from his pocket and used the flash again. With a clearly visible shrug, he stuffed everything back in his pockets, and returned to the car.

"You didn't ticket it?"

"Nahh. One of *those* licenses."

"Oh. Oh, well." The driver put the car in gear, and it rolled quietly away.

Twenty-five minutes after midnight, a heavy van rumbled down Liberty Street, and made a clumsy left turn into Liberty Place. It stopped halfway up the block, then backed around until it was blocking the street, its rear almost against a dingy warehouse door.

Had anyone familiar with the street and its few, failing businesses seen this, he would have been perplexed. That

warehouse door had not been used in years. The first-floor windows of the building had been bricked up years ago. The stationery store next door had expanded into the building.

But the door rolled up soundlessly and, behind it, lit by dim yellow bulbs, was a cubicle, measuring eight feet across, and eight feet deep. Its walls were wood, fresh-looking, but already work-scarred.

Five men stood in the small room, although there were no other doors visible. One of the five was tall, thin, expensively dressed, and quite bald.

The other four were dressed in dirty coveralls and, now that the door was up, they moved quickly to open the back doors of the van, which opened into the room and cut off the last opportunity of visibility for anyone on the street. There was no one out on the street, of course. No one lived in these buildings.

A cart stood in the center of the small room. While the bald man stood in one corner, watching, the other men began unloading the cart, three of them passing its contents up to the truck bed, while the fourth, leaping up into the truck, positioned each load.

The cart wasn't large and its load wasn't large, not more than two cubic feet. The load looked basically like a load of bricks. But as each man in turn lifted a brick from the stack on the cart, muscles stood out on his arms, and his back strained.

Each man slid his brick into the wood-ridged truck bed, where the fourth man pulled it, slid it, to the front of the load-space, where the bricks were arranged side-by-side.

There were not that many bricks. Soon they were all loaded. The man in the truck released the plywood boards standing against the van sides, and they fell over the bricks. He aligned them, and finished driving in the nails. Now, to all casual eyes, the truck bed looked empty. A tarp, tossed

loose into one corner, completed the illusion. The man jumped down from the truck, and one of the others helped him close and bolt the doors. He gave the closed doors a smart rap, and, in acknowledgement, the truck's starter whined and the engine roared into life.

As the truck started way from the curb, the tall, bald man thumbed a heavy button, and the door began unwinding, sliding its jointed metal slats smoothly down into place. When the door was closed, and its motor silent, he thumbed a second button, and the room began to sink.

The five men waited in stoic silence as the open front of the elevator slid whining past old bricks, and then new concrete, until finally light began to show along its bottom edge, and it was facing an open passage.

The men in working clothes grabbed the cart and leaped off the elevator while it was still a foot from the floor of the passage, but the bald man remained stationary until it was halted. He glanced up. Overhead, invisible in the gloom of the shaft, he knew a second elevator had moved down to replace the first at ground level. It would not come lower, would only rise into the upper stories of the warehouse building. It was very unlikely that the lower shaft would ever be discovered.

The passageway ahead was an old tunnel, its air musty, and thick with dust. Half-rotten timbers provided the shoring, while a wire meandered along the roof, hanging from shiny nails, light bulbs sprouting off it at intervals like fruit on a vine.

The other men had disappeared ahead, but, instead of following them, the bald man turned into a side passage. This was narrower, wide enough only for two men abreast, and fresher-looking. He followed it into a room.

The room was of obviously recent construction. It was not large; perhaps ten-feet square. The floor was packed dirt, while the walls and ceiling were of plywood, braced by two-

by-fours. There were two other doors and, through the open one, beds and another room could be seen. The air here was damp, and musty as it had been in the tunnel, but other odors also hung unmoving in the room: the smells of cooked food, human sweat, stale tobacco smoke, and other odors of men living in a confined area.

The man seated himself in a straight-backed chair before a crude desk made of packing-case wood and plywood. There was little on the desk—a few papers, an unfolded map, which he folded and set aside, and a telephone.

The telephone was a lineman's phone; handset made of thick hard rubber, with a small dial on its back, wires leading from it ending in alligator clips.

The alligator clips had been attached to a heavy wire, and secured with friction tape. The wire ran up the wall and along the ceiling to the top of the closed door, where it disappeared around the corner.

When the thin, tall, bald man lifted the phone, a dial tone was buzzing steadily from the earpiece. He turned it over and, taking the piece that protruded from the miniature dial with careful fingers, he dialed a number.

There was a series of clicks, then the sound of a phone ringing at the other end of the line.

It rang four times, and then a voice answered. The voice was thin, colorless, and impossible to distinguish as to sex. It might have been a man; it might have been a woman.

"Yes?"

"Starling here."

"Yes? How did it go?"

"Successfully. We got the first big load out. No difficulty."

"I'll be expecting to hear from Raven, then, shortly?"

"You should be. The truck shouldn't take more'n half an hour."

“Good. Very good.” The line went dead.

Starling set the handset down, and pushed the chair back, rising. Its legs caught in the rough dirt of the floor, and he had to reach to grab the chair and keep it from falling. He allowed his face to express momentary annoyance, and then smoothed his features blank once more.

He crossed the room to the closed door, opened it, stepped through, and closed it again. He was at the foot of a ladder. He followed it up past dim yellow light bulbs spaced almost too far apart, islands of light that didn’t quite touch, past raw earth and splintered rock, until at last he reached a landing.

He pushed a button next to the gap in the wall and, as a servo-motor began whining, the wall behind the gap swung back, and he was again in the litter-strewn cellar.

He moved up the stairs without haste, meticulously turning off the lights as he went, until he was out of the building and once more on the empty sidewalk.

The wind had grown chillier. He pulled his topcoat more snugly around him, and settled his Homburg on his bald pate. There was no traffic on the street. His footsteps made loud echoes. When he slammed his car door shut behind him, the heavy *thunk* bounced back and forth between the deserted buildings that lined the street.

At 1:05 a.m., the patrol car passed Liberty Place at Liberty Street. The driver glanced up the short block, and noticed it was empty. He made no comment to his companion.

* Check your files, frantic ones! It’s all in *The Avengers* #16, May, 1965.—Helpful Stan.

CHAPTER 6

INTO THE VAULT

A cab drew up before 44 Maiden Lane, and a big man in a topcoat and a slouch hat stepped out. The imposing edifice of the New York Federal Reserve Bank rose up beside him, dwarfing his massive figure.

The day was chill and drab, a heavy overcast under which lower clouds scudded. The forecast said there was a chance of snow.

It was not yet 8:30 in the morning, yet the big main door of the bank was opened as the man approached it. As he stepped inside, he removed his hat with red-gloved fingers.

"Captain America? This way, please." A small, middle-aged man secured the door and then led him into an office area.

Rogers shrugged his way out of the topcoat and slung it over the back of the chair before he sat down. They were in a small but richly paneled office.

"Now, then..." The man behind the desk couldn't seem to take his eyes off the form-fitting uniform, and the gong-like shield that Rogers had set against his chair.

He took advantage of the awkward pause to do a little sizing up of his own. The door had said only "Vice Director," but the name on the desk was "John B. Gaughan." Gaughan seemed taller seated behind his own desk. It was possible

he'd had his chair built up. His thin lips pursed nervously, and then he smiled.

"I—I must apologize for staring. I've seen you in photographs, of course, but...Tell me, do you find the, ah, costume as effective these years? I mean, before the war, everything was so different."

Rogers shrugged. "It serves its purpose. Now, as to my purpose in coming here..."

"Umm, yes. What *was* your purpose?"

"As I told your director, I have reason to suspect that gold is being stolen from a United States depository."

"*What?*" Gaughan waved his hands distractedly. "Impossible. Most impossible. Movies like *Goldfinger* to the contrary, um, sir, our depositories are most adequately guarded. And we have no losses."

"No *reported* losses," Rogers corrected. He turned to his topcoat and felt in the pockets. He pulled out an object and tossed it onto Gaughan's desk blotter, where it tore a thin rip. It was the chunk of gold. "What do you make of that?"

Gaughan picked it up dubiously. "Of course, I can't ascertain that it *is* gold..."

"It is. How about the seal?"

Gaughan set the piece down gingerly and reached for a desk drawer. Then he was studying the seal with a magnifying glass.

He turned the piece over and over, studying each surface. Finally he looked up. His complexion seemed two shades lighter. "I—I must state that this piece gives every evident of being cut from a bar of government-owned gold."

"How about a bar in private hands?"

"Not with this seal. No, sir."

"All right then. It was removed from a government bar of gold. Which takes us back to my original statement. Gold is

being stolen. Or rather, *has been*."

"May I ask how you came by this piece?"

"You may," Rogers said, unsmiling.

"I—uhh—well, how did you?"

It delighted Rogers to shake the fussy little man loose for a moment from his tidy world. "It was brought to me by a man who died before he could tell me how he'd gotten it."

"*Died?*"

"Murdered."

"Oh, my!"

"Getting back to cases, Mr. Gaughan. Just where do you suppose this man might have got that thing?"

"Well, sir, I'm sure I don't know. I..."

"Not Fort Knox, I should imagine," Rogers said, cutting through the man's vague protestations.

"No, sir. I must admit that it seems more likely that it would be here."

"I rather thought so."

"We—we have more gold in our vaults than Fort Knox, anyway," Gaughan said, almost visibly puffing with pride. "We currently have almost thirteen billion dollars in gold on deposit, as against only a little over ten billion at Fort Knox. We act as a depository for many foreign powers, you see," he explained, leaning forward at his desk. "They feel safer just keeping it here. Our underground vaults are airtight, and absolutely safe."

"Uh huh! And somebody just couldn't resist the challenge."

"I—well, I—I just can't imagine..."

"Let's not leave it to your imagination. Let's check it out. Let's take a little guided tour."

"What? I'm sorry, sir, but that's out. I mean, you may be Captain America, but the security on these vaults is

absolute. After all, we don't even know that beneath that mask..." His words trailed off as Rogers rose ominously.

"I can go over your head, Gaughan," he said softly. "And I will, if necessary. What were your orders from the director?"

Gaughan wilted under the stare of the awesome figure standing over him. "I—I was to give you every courtesy, sir. But," he began to pull himself together. "But I must remind you, sir, that this is not the Army. We do not function under rigid orders here. I have discretionary powers."

Rogers smiled. "If I removed my mask, would you have any better idea of who I am?"

Gaughan wiped away the perspiration on his forehead. He pushed his chair back, and stood. "Come this way," he said in defeat.

Gaughan was still not trusting; two guards preceded them, and two more followed behind.

"You realize, a minor loss would not be easily discovered, if there was a loss," Gaughan said, as he led Rogers through the low vaults. They were buried eighty-five feet below street level. "We would require an inventory."

Rogers smiled, said nothing. His eyes were alert, but he was not looking at the gold ingots, stacked with precision in neat rows. The others would spot any real loss there before he would. Instead, he was scanning the floors and walls, particularly the joints where they met, watching for the slightest irregularity.

Suddenly he stopped, a guard behind stumbling against him.

"I think I've found something," he said quietly.

"Eh? What's that?" Gaughan asked nervously.

"Dirt," Rogers said, holding the palm of a hand upward. On the tips of his crimson-gloved fingers was a whitish clay powder.

"Dirt? Come now," Gaughan said impatiently.

"Dirt that was obviously tracked into here," Rogers replied. "You." He gestured at the guard next to him. "Let's see the soles of your shoes."

"My shoes are clean, sir," the guard said, raising one foot and bracing himself against the wall.

"Exactly," Rogers said. "Gaughan, we've got solid evidence."

"Evidence? What evidence? What are you trying to prove?"

Rogers' voice took on a patient tone, as if humoring someone not very bright. "This dirt. It was not tracked in here by the guards. It was not tracked in by you, nor by me. It is clay, of a type found in this area of the city, but only underground. Are you starting to get the picture?"

"Good heavens, man! Are you saying that someone—ah—*dug* his way in? And tracked that dirt in with him?"

Rogers sighed. "Exactly."

It didn't take long to find the concealed entrance. A square of concrete in the floor sounded hollow. Close inspection proved the concrete to be newer, fresher; dirt and oil had been worked over it to "age" it to the color of the surrounding concrete floor.

The square sat flush with the floor. "We're going to need tools to get this open," Rogers grunted.

"Tools?"

"A pry bar, at the least. We may have to smash it. They may have it secured on the underside."

"Can—can you be sure that this is what you're looking for?"

"Sure enough," Rogers replied without looking up. Gaughan was getting on his nerves.

“Here, sir.” A guard handed him a pry bar and a hammer. “We keep these handy for crating.”

“Fine.” He pushed the pry bar against the crack between concrete slabs, but it was too fine for the thick bar to penetrate. Instead, he turned it like a chisel, and began hammering at it, chipping away the edges of the concrete square *next* to the one he wanted to pry up.

“Isn’t that the wrong one?” Gaughan inquired.

Rogers didn’t answer. When he had cut away enough of the concrete, he pushed his bar into the newly widened gap and began to pull back on it, applying pressure against the phony slab.

For a moment nothing happened. Then the muscles on Captain America’s arms began to stand out, like thick ropes, and there was a grating sound as the steel bar ground against the concrete.

Then there was a muffled snapping and the phony slab flew upward, rocking Rogers back on his heels.

He rose to his feet, and handed the bar back to the guard who’d supplied it. “I’m afraid that won’t be much good any more,” he said. The bar was badly bent. The guard gave a soft whistle.

The concrete slab had been a trap door and, now that it was lying upside down on the floor, they could see that it had consisted of a plywood board, onto which concrete had been cast. Hanging at a twisted angle from the plywood was a heavy metal bracket, only one slot still holding it. Below, in the opening in the floor, they could see a four-by-four still braced across a shaft, its intended purpose defeated. Rogers gave it a kick and it slid sidewise and fell clattering down the shaft.

The guards had their guns out, and Rogers told them, “Okay, you boys follow me. Gaughan, you’d better get upstairs and pass the word.” He picked up his shield, and

started down the ladder. As his eyes reached floor level, he noticed a series of wires, crudely fastened around one side of the hole. A network of alarm wires laid under the floor had been neatly bypassed and clipped.

The shaft dropped twelve feet, where a dim yellow bulb cast its feeble rays upon the foot of a passageway. As Captain America dropped to the ground, his massive shadow moved ominously across the densely packed earthen walls. They were six feet apart, but he couldn't shake the claustrophobic feeling that they were too close. There was no sign of anyone in the tunnel.

The first guard dropped behind him, gun drawn. "Anybody down here?"

"Not in sight."

"Mark is staying up above, just to backstop us."

"Good idea." He moved out a little further in the tunnel to make room as the second and third guards, gun each in hand, came down the ladder.

"All right," Rogers said. "You'll stay behind me, and not fire unless I say to. In these confined spaces, gunshots could be dangerous."

The tunnel smelled dankly of dampness and earth, mingled with the stale odor of old cigarette smoke. The packed floor was rutted, and Rogers noted in passing that these tracks must have been created by the cart used to haul the stolen gold.

The tunnel extended forty yards of widely spaced yellow lights, and then suddenly opened out into a much larger tunnel. This passageway was ten yards wide, and twenty feet high. Old timbers shored up the roof, and Rogers poked at one with one finger. A piece gouged out, dry and crumbling.

"Odd," he mused. "*This* certainly isn't recent construction."

They moved more cautiously now, edging along one wall of the tunnel, which was gradually curving to the right.

“Hold it,” Rogers whispered, raising his hand to halt the men behind him. Ahead was the lighted interior of the freight elevator and, off to one side, a more brightly lit passageway.

“Okay, men. This is it. We’ve reached the end of the line. If anyone is hanging around, he’ll be up that side tunnel. I want you to fan out along the sides of this tunnel and keep me covered. I’m going in.”

Holding his shield before him, crouching a little, Captain America ducked, then darted into the side tunnel.

Immediately, heavy gunshots boomed out, the explosions almost concussive in the confined space.

Captain America’s shield carried a white star, painted at its center, and surrounded by a blue field with concentric rings of red, white, and red. The effect was often hypnotic; despite the known effectiveness of the armored shield, his enemies often found themselves firing at it, as if at a target. It was a psychological effect that Rogers had counted on more than once—and it saved him now.

Holding as much of his body as possible behind the shield, he ran down the short tunnel toward his attacker.

He could see the man only in silhouette, his bulky body outlined by the doorway behind him, his gun raised, its muzzle-flashes bright punctuations. The shots were a sharp thunder on Rogers’ ears, their impact clanging heavily against his shield.

The man seemed suddenly to realize that his shots couldn’t stop Captain America’s onward rush, and he jerked backward into the room.

Then Rogers was through the door and, in one swift motion, throwing his shield.

It was like hurling an oversized discus. The shield sliced into the still-retreating heavy-set man, doubling him over to fall, clutching his stomach and retching, only semiconscious.

The guards burst into the room behind him, and Rogers motioned them to spread out along the walls, to approach the other two doors only with great caution.

But it didn't matter.

No one else was there.

"It looks like you've cleaned out the rats' nest, sir," one of the guards reported, after climbing back down the long ladder from the cellar above. He'd left his companion stationed there. The third man was standing guard at the elevator.

"Only one man," Rogers mused. "But that room in there looks like living quarters for half a dozen. Where are the rest?"

"They must operate at night, sir. They couldn't risk getting into the vaults in daylight. Maybe they left only this man on guard."

"Perhaps."

The tall figure of Captain America moved purposefully to the fallen thug. The man was unshaven, and his eyes, when he eventually opened them, were weak and shifty.

He sat against the wall, his legs straight in front of him.

Rogers leaned over him.

"Okay, fella. It's time for some talking."

"I don't know nuthin'," the man grunted sullenly.

Rogers bent, and fixed his gauntleted fist in the man's shirt. He rose smoothly to full height, pulling the heavier man with him. He shook the man twice, jerking his head back and forth.

"Let's not be stubborn."

"I—I..." The man's eyes had glazed, and his mouth hung slackly. He was slumped, limp, in Rogers' grasp.

But he had stolen a covert glimpse at the crude desk at the side of the room.

Rogers let the man fall, sprawling to the dirt floor. With two quick strides, he was at the desk.

There were papers on the desk, most of them covered with penciled notations and computations. The figures were mostly in feet and yards; calculations apparently used in digging the tunnels.

Also lying on the plywood desk was an olive-drab handset, a lineman's phone. Rogers' eyes traced the leads from it to the wall, the ceiling, and the door he knew led upward. He picked the phone up, and held it to his ear.

The line was open. For a long moment he heard nothing. Then he caught it—the swallow rasp of a breath caught and held at the other end of the wire.

He listened, and waited. Suddenly a voice spoke.

"Who is this?"

Rogers chuckled. "Company."

"Captain America?"

"Speaking. And you?"

"I'm sorry I missed you," the voice said. "Had I known you were coming, I'd have arranged a reception committee."

"You did the best you could, under the circumstances," Rogers said. "Sorry we've had to clean you out."

"Oh, don't be. Just be sorry we'll be cleaning *you* out." The voice paused for emphasis. "Try *this*, for openers."

A giant hand smashed through the wall and drove Captain America into oblivion.

CHAPTER 7

CAPTAIN AMERICA IS DEAD!

The underground explosion shook the old building's very foundations. Starling listened for another moment to the dead phone, then replaced it. Damn that man! He had cut short what might have been the greatest criminal coup in the history of the United States! They'd managed to get out only one load of gold; less than a million dollars' worth—a drop in the bucket. And now the scheme was smashed, the entire plan, the underground tunnels, approaches, all shot.

His fingers shook as he dialed another number and misdialled the last digit, forcing him to hang up and dial over. Then he had an open line.

"Yes?"

"This is Starling."

"What? Not now, not here!"

"I had to. I..."

"I know, you fool. I know. Captain America has discovered the tunnels."

"Yes. Yes, I..."

"Did you manage to take care of him? I realize that the operation has been blown, but..."

"Yes, I think so. I mean, I don't know. But he must be dead. I had the circuit open. I'd left Bruno in charge, as you'd said. I heard everything that happened. Bruno

couldn't stop him. He must've noticed the phone. He picked it up. I exchanged a few words with him to hold him there while I threw the switch. I know the stuff went off. I could feel it up here."

"We'll have to scrub operations there. Don't call me at this number again. I'll get in touch with you through Raven."

"Yes. Okay, Boss."

Starling hung up slowly. He moved with equal slowness across the dim-lit room. From the cot in the corner he picked up his topcoat, his hat. He put them on almost abstractedly. Captain America was almost certainly dead. But so was their plan to loot the greatest stockpile of gold in the United States. It was bitterly galling. If there had been another way... But there could have been no other way. He'd had to let the men out for a little air and recreation. He'd done that even before the boss' call, earlier that morning. Only Bruno had been there. And Bruno had been an inadequate defense.

If he could have stopped Captain America without destroying the tunnel network...

But it would have been no good. Too many others knew by now. In a sense, the explosion of dynamite had been a pointless, almost petty thing—a futile revenge, nothing more. No, it had been good for more than that; it guaranteed confusion, and escape. He slammed the door to the room without locking it, and hurried down the stairs.

Ray Thompson was a hardworking, underpaid (in his wife's opinion) bank guard. Until today, his life had been a dull one. It had been one free of taint, his record clean. There had been no trouble with his application to be bonded when he was accepted as a guard.

The sight of the gold bars it was his duty, in part, to guard, didn't affect him particularly. He couldn't connect

those dull-yellow leaden bars with money; not with his monthly paycheck, with bills, with a Friday night beer at the bar on the corner, with infrequent movies with his wife (when a babysitter could be found). Money was an official light-green IBM card with his name typed on it, and the respective holes punched, that came every fifteenth of the month, was deposited in his checking account, and went out again in the form of rent, utility bills, and time-payments on his TV set, his wife's washing machine and dryer (a necessity since the kids), the new living room set, his car.

Sometimes his palms itched when it was his duty to carry or guard bags of bundled bills, or boxes of rolled coins. Then he felt himself to be in the presence of money, real and palpable money. Sometimes he thought, in a wistful, daydreaming sort of way, of helping himself to a stray bundle of bills—tens or twenties, say—not enough to be missed; just enough to get a few of those monthly payments out of the way, and maybe make his ownership of just one appliance free and clear.

But he had never given way to such an impulse, and he never would. Ray Thompson was that rarity—an honest man, even in the face of temptation.

The thought of anyone stealing those heavy gold ingots, stacked so evenly, row upon row, in the subterranean vaults of the Reserve Bank, came almost as a surprise to him. An equal surprise had been the sight of the almost-mythical uniformed figure of Captain America, as he had led them down into the clandestine tunnels beneath the vaults. He had wondered, briefly, if a man like Captain America ever knew the pinch of too many bills, had ever felt desperate over the arrival of yet another mouth to feed. But, of course, Captain America had no family, and would hardly concern himself with such matters. It didn't occur to Thompson to wonder if this in itself might not be something for which to pity Captain America.

He had been standing in the darkened cellar above the linked tunnels, the concealed shelf-door closed, when the explosion came. It came through two closed doors, and up a long shaft. It flung the heavy shelves over on him, knocking him to the floor.

The thunderclap had been muffled but, as he pulled himself out from under the collapsed shelves, he coughed rackingly. The cellar was chokingly full of dust. It tickled his nose and throat, turning his coughs into painful sneezes.

He moved stumblingly for the stairs, and fresher air—what there was to be had of it. Then duty overtook him again, and he moved back, into the cellar.

The lights, when he switched them on, still worked. They received their power from above, not below.

The light that spilled from the landing beyond the collapsed wall of shelves was foggy, and his moving shadow cut thick holes in it. He tugged at the shelves, groping at them to pull them aside. His gun was under them and, without thinking beyond that, he knew he needed his gun.

He didn't think about the explosion below, and what must have happened to the men down there. Instead he searched methodically for his gun and, finding it, holstered it and moved into the landing area, to the ladder.

The lights showed only halfway down the shaft. But he climbed carefully down the unsteady ladder until he reached that point. He could go no further. It was caved in below.

He poked with one foot, halfheartedly, as though poking might unstop the shaft like a momentarily plugged drain, and free the way. But he was rewarded only by a quiver from the ladder, and it was with the haste born of caution that he reascended it.

There was nothing to be gained by remaining in the cellar now. It no longer connected with the tunnel network below; there was nothing to guard against. Leaving the lights

untouched, he trudged up the stairs to the grimy hallway that led to the street.

The clatter of running feet on the stairs above stopped him. It was probably only someone alerted by the subterranean explosion, a curiosity seeker, but it paid to be on one's guard. The building itself had not yet been explored.

He had his gun drawn when Starling turned the corner of the last flight of stairs.

When Starling saw the man in the dark-blue uniform, standing there with a drawn gun and covered with dust, he had no doubts in his mind. He plunged his hand under his coat, drew his slim 25 caliber automatic, and squeezed off three fast shots. The sound was like that of three sharp slaps in the dim hallway. The uniformed man fell.

He hadn't been able to make out the man's features, and had only begun to be surprised at the sight of a man so elegantly dressed in these shoddy surroundings, when the man's arm had made a quick motion, and something was flashing at him.

From a vast distance he heard the shots, and understood their meaning. He had never been fired upon before. He had never fought in a war. There was nothing real about this situation. It was barefaced melodrama.

And grossly unfair. He felt the shock of the bullets' impact. One of them hit his chest, striking bone. The second collapsed his left leg under him. Such tiny things, bullets. The third lodged in his brain as he was folding.

Starling stared down at the dead man. His thoughts raced close to panic. He'd killed a man. Had anyone heard the

shots? Were there more people about? Where had the man come from? He forced himself into a calmer deliberation.

The cellar lights were off. Yet if the dust on his clothes was any indication, the man had come from there.

Okay, he'd been in the cellar, above the explosion when it had come. He'd come up. Alone. No one else had responded to the shots.

It was safe.

He slipped the gun into an outer pocket, where he could touch it, feel its reassuring grip easily, without appearing suspicious. Then he stepped over the body, and walked quickly to the door.

He pulled the door open, and eased his way out. There was no sign of police. In measured strides, he walked down the block to Maiden Lane. He glanced to the right. The forbidding bulk of the Federal Reserve Bank seemed to glower back at him from a block away. He turned left instead, and headed west. At least he'd got out free.

When Captain America awoke, there was a loud ringing in his ears, and his body was racked with pain. He wondered at first if he was also blind, but when he moved his head he caught a glimmering of light.

Where was he? What had happened to him?

The only thing he could remember was that voice on the phone—that slightly oily voice. It had threatened him; he remembered that. The voice had seemed too certain of itself, too undisappointed. That had warned him. But what then?

His head ached. Something pounded at it, rhythmically, in cadence with the ululations in his ears. He tried to shift to a more comfortable position.

Something pinned down his legs. There was no distinct pressure at any one spot; he couldn't sort out any special

sensations in his legs beyond that ache that seemed to permeate his body. He felt as though he'd been worked over by a meat grinder. He let himself relax again. He had detected the warning. After that?

He fought to reconstruct it in his mind. It was important. Perhaps he'd understand where he was if he could remember what had happened.

He'd dropped the phone—there was something odd about the phone. Yes, he remembered now. It was a lineman's phone. That meant...

He began rebuilding his memory forward and backward. He'd been in an underground room, a room he'd reached through—through tunnels! Tunnels—from the vault, the bank vault, the gold depository.

The voice on the phone had held a note of triumph, as though another card was yet to be played. He'd felt the warning, the urgency. He'd dropped the phone, sprinted for the tunnel. The guard, the captured thug? He couldn't remember. The last thing he remembered was a blow, a jarring concussion. After that, darkness.

At least he had some idea of where he was now. He was in one of the tunnels.

Carefully, he raised his right arm. He felt as weak as a baby. Sweat broke out on his forehead under his cowl mask, trickling an itchy path down his face. His fingers touched something that crumbled.

Dirt.

He was buried under a pile of dirt. He felt a smothering wave of claustrophobia sweep over him.

Buried, yes. But his exploring fingers found the dirt covered him only midway up his chest. His upper chest and shoulders, his head, were free.

He craned his head, and again caught the far-off glimmer of a light. It didn't move, but it was reassuring. A way was

open—that far, at least.

He wished he could hear. Or, rather, hear more than the nerve-jangling ringing that pervaded his ears.

Raising his arms, he dug down with his hands, and tried to sit up.

Nausea hit him like a club to the side of his head, knocking him flat. He passed out.

The big black Continental took the 39th Street ramp off the Brooklyn Belt Parkway elevated expressway, coasting down to the stop sign at Second Avenue. Straight ahead lay a freight yard, a few rusting freight cars surrounded by tall grass. Beyond, the squat building of the 39th Street Pier, and the oily water of the bay. If you squinted closely, you could separate the haze from the water, and make out between them, across the bay, the equally squalid New Jersey shoreline, with its own rundown industrial area.

Diagonally across the intersection was a yellowed concrete building, from which came the staccato chatter of many small machines. In the center of Second Avenue were two pairs of railroad tracks, recessed like old trolley-car tracks. Every few yards, a pair of tracks would split off into the yards and warehouses. On a gray day like this, Starling found it particularly depressing.

Ignoring the Right-Turn-Only sign, he swung the car left, onto the jouncing cobblestones, and south, down the avenue. A city bus, lumbering into the intersection, honked its impotent horn at him. He replied by goosing the gas, his tires chirping on the uneven surface of the street.

As he drove down the narrow avenue, past trucks angled out into the street, cars double-parked, and darting oncoming cabs that swung into his lane, and then ducked back into their own, he watched the street signs closely. On his right were warehouses, industrial lofts, trucks backed

against their loading bins. On his left, going up the hill away from the water, rows of narrow tenements, paint peeling, dirty children in inadequate clothing swarming in the streets, playing their arcane games.

When he reached the fifties he slowed, and paid closer attention to street signs and addresses. He had been here only twice before, both times at night, when things were quiet. He chuckled as he remembered the first time, when he'd come down off the expressway to be confronted by a freight train in the center of the avenue, its big single light gleaming like Cyclops' eye, an incongruously tinny bell jingling. This wasn't his New York. This was Brooklyn.

Up ahead, on his right, was a tin-sided two-storied building, flush against a taller, concrete building. The gray paint was peeling from its corrugated sides, leaving blood-brown patches of rust. He angled his car into the curb, and tapped his horn lightly. One of the huge twin doors that covered the face of the building swung inward, and he drove up, over the sunken curb, and into the building.

A man in shirtsleeves, heavy blond hair a crop over his face and down the back of his neck, his belly joggling, pushed the door shut and ambled over. "Staying long?"

"What do you mean by that?" Starling snapped.

"Nothing much. Just, if you intend to make a day of it, I'll put the car on the elevator. Otherwise it can stay."

Starling shrugged. "The operation is blown. I'll be here till the boss calls. Better put it on the elevator." He slid the door open and climbed out, leaving the engine running.

The other took his place and, revving the engine, backed and angled it over onto an elevator.

"Watch it, Raven," Starling said nervously. "You're no parking-lot attendant." The floor of the building was littered with odd pieces of heavy machinery. In the back stood an old van.

Raven slid the car onto two parallel skids. Then he leaned across the seat to the nearby wall, and punched a switch.

Immediately, the elevator began to rise, the thick column pushing the skids, lifting the Continental ponderously into the air.

Above, a section of the flooring overhead swung open and up.

The elevator didn't pause at six feet, nor at nine. It didn't stop until the skids were even with the floor above, and the car had all but vanished. Raven engaged the transmission and slowly backed the Continental out of sight. There was a pause, then the elevator mechanism began to sigh, and the skids started dropping.

Soon the ceiling was solid again, and the elevator was on the floor. There was no sign of a car in the dimly lit building. Raven came whistling down some side stairs, his feet heavy on the squeaking steps.

"Okay," he said, fixing Starling with a sudden stare.

"Tell me about it."

CHAPTER 8

THE EAGLE SCREAMS

When he awoke again, Captain America felt lightheaded. Cramping pains shot up and down his legs, his mouth was dry, his throat parched. He felt feverish, arid—that, he knew, was wrong. He was a man who was never sick.

He shook his head. It was the wrong thing to do. A wave of nausea attacked his stomach, while sharp hammers beat upon his skull. His ears still sang.

How long had he been unconscious *this* time?

Gritting his teeth, he willed his body to quiescence, and the pains began to subside. It was time now to make use of his own special abilities. If he couldn't bring them into play soon, there would be no more chance at all.

He slowed his breathing until it was somnambulant, and brought his pulse down to forty. His conscious mind began to dim, but his subconscious knew exactly what must be done.

When he reemerged from his dreamlike state he had only vague memories of what he had done. But he could feel the difference. His ears were no longer ringing, his head felt clear, and his body was fit. The aches and pains were gone; he tingled with liveliness.

There was a price, of course. He felt hungry. And well he might, for he had lost seven pounds in the last few minutes,

the weight having been converted into caloric energy to rebuild and revitalize his muscular tissues, and to clear the toxins from his body.

His hearing was restored, but he heard nothing—nothing save a slow dripping sound somewhere not too far away. The glimmer of a distant light bulb was still there when he turned his head, but it gave him no useful illumination. He was still trapped, still buried to his chest in the heavy earth.

Quietly, with determination, he began using his hand to dig himself out.

The heavy gauntlets helped; he blessed them many times over. Without them his fingers would be raw and bleeding by now. But even with them, the going was painfully slow. For every handful of dirt he pushed aside, a new handful would collapse upon him. It was a slow and tedious business.

At last he was free to his thighs. Pushing his hands against the firmer ground, he arched his body and yanked.

He catapulted out, bootless.

He thought about that for a moment, grinned to himself in the darkness, and then reached through the looser rubble, down through the twin tunnels in the packed dirt where his legs had been, and freed his boots. He hadn't relished going out barefoot.

Only one bulb was burning near the elevator; the others had shattered. He'd been thrown halfway down the side tunnel before it had collapsed on him. The main tunnel, even in this weak light, was a sight for sore eyes.

But not for long.

First he found the guard. He was unconscious, blood oozing in a thin trickle from the corner of his mouth. When Rogers turned him over, he saw blood in his nose and ears. The effects of the concussive power of the explosion, obviously. He applied first aid, doing the best he could. The

rest was up to the emergency ward teams, as soon as he could get them down here.

He wondered where the rescue teams were. He had been down here, conscious and unconscious, for what seemed like hours. Where was everyone?

Then he remembered the room he'd been in; the thug and the other guard. He hadn't had time to warn them. They must be dead. It was only a freak accident that had prevented his own death.

Or had he had time?

It was so difficult to remember. Everything was so packed into those last split seconds. Could he have grabbed the other two and thrown them out, ahead of him?

His head was starting to throb again. This was no time to rehash the past. He had to assess the rest of the damage.

He didn't have to blunder far up the tunnel to find the reason for the temporary absence of any rescuers; the old timbers, temporary supports in the first place, had collapsed. The tunnel was totally blocked.

That left the elevator. No one had had time to check it out; he had to hope it would still run, still get him up to the surface. If it was undamaged it should; it had to be the route by which the gold had been taken.

He carried the still unconscious bank guard into the bed of the elevator, and then pushed the heavy switch. Immediately a motor, somewhere up above, began to hum. Cables snapped taut, and the elevator made its slow ascent.

Captain America gave a heartfelt sigh of relief.

Starling stared around in surprise as Raven led him down the stairs to his basement apartment beneath the tin-sided garage. It was not at all what he had expected.

In his own mind he had cast Raven as a cloddish oaf when he had first met him. He imagined Raven living in some

squalid little flat somewhere not far from the waterfront, sitting in front of his TV set in the evenings, a can of beer in his hand. He had not added it to his mental picture, but flies buzzing about Raven's dirty undershirt would have been totally in keeping. Raven was a mechanic, that was about all he knew of the man. Both of them, Starling and Raven, were only lieutenants, along with one other, Sparrow, and undoubtedly others of whom Starling hadn't heard, for the boss, Eagle. He had never met Eagle, and doubted privately that he ever would. The boss kept himself removed from the scene of his nefarious schemes, manipulating his lieutenants instead as a man might puppets on a string. This much Starling knew; his contacts with Eagle had been entirely over the phone.

The stairs had led down from a partitioned-off area in the back of the garage. He had expected a low-ceilinged basement area, dank, not so different from the dirt-floored tunnels he had himself dug, rusting beams and pillars supporting the concrete floor overhead.

Instead, he found himself standing on a lush-piled carpet, indirect lighting softly illuminating somber paneling on the walls and boxed stanchions that did, indeed, support the floor above. The furniture was polished wood, deceptively plain; he knew it was expensive. Portions of the walls were draped with richly textured fabric, softening the fact that there were no windows.

There was a TV screen, but it was custom-fitted into a wall of bookcases. On either side, also recessed, were large AR3 speakers and, below the books, cabinets, one door of which was partially open, revealing neat rows of record albums. It was a complete stereo system.

"Sit," Raven said. "Surprised, eh?"

Starling mumbled something indistinct.

"Everyone has their secrets," Raven said. "This is mine."

"You keep the gold down here, too?"

Raven guffawed. "Sent that out on the boat last night. You think I'm gonna carry that stuff down all these stairs?"

"Oh." Starling felt deflated and somehow defeated, as though by the simple act of having this secret apartment, Raven had gained the upper hand.

"Okay, now let's hear it. How'd you blow it?"

"Me? Why, you stupid...!" Reflexively, Starling's hand reached inside his topcoat for his gun.

"Ease off, fella. Touchy, eh?" Raven smiled, showing a mouthful of brown stubs for teeth. "What I mean is..."

"Touchy?" Starling cut him off "Touchy? The biggest operation of its kind in the world, and it's shot, and you're surprised I'm touchy!"

"Aww, come on now. You didn't expect it to go on forever? You think we'd have milked the whole bank? They'd have caught on, sooner or later; had to. A little skimmed off the top they mightn't miss, but more'n that? So we don't set up in competition with Fort Knox, we still cleared a tidy sum."

"What are you talking about? You didn't *expect* us to succeed?"

"I guess the boss ain't told you everything, huh?"

That was galling. The knowledge that this oaf might be more in the Eagle's confidence than he, Starling, was too much. "Shut your mouth!" He turned away from the other man, then whirled back on him. Raven was still grinning. "What hasn't he told me?"

"Ohhh," Raven rolled his eyes in mockery. "My lips are sealed."

"Well, for your information, there was a leak. I don't know how it happened. One of the men, a guy named Monk, he slipped out. At the time we thought he was just trying to sell information. I told the boss; he had the man taken care of. Then, after our boys left the scene, we found a bar of gold—

one of the first ones we'd taken after we'd broken through—with the seal cut off it. Monk must've had it. It must've been found on him. That's what blew it."

"Monk, huh? An undercover cop?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. He made a beeline for the Stark mansion."

Raven whistled, tonelessly. "The Avengers, huh?"

"Captain America. The others are away. He came down to the bank this morning. I got the warning, but all the men were out except for Bruno. He was no use. I had to use the dynamite."

"Well, that takes care of one of those costumed nuts."

"Let's hope so. But it also takes care of two months' planning and hard work. It's not a fair trade."

"That's from your point of view. Maybe..."

The quiet buzz of a phone cut Raven off. He ambled across the room. "It's an unlisted number; the safe wire. Must be the..." He picked up the phone. "Yeah. Hullo, Boss."

Raven listened for several moments. "Yeah, he's here. Yeah." He held out the phone to Starling. "He wants to talk to you."

Starling took the handset. "Yes?"

"You failed."

"What?"

"You failed. Captain America is still alive."

"But, but—he can't be! I mean, the dynamite! I felt the explosion myself! It must've sealed off the whole underground!"

"It did. But nonetheless, he got free. He *is* free. I have a new assignment for you."

Starling felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"I want you to capture Captain America. I want you to get him, and bring him to me!"

When the freight elevator had reached street level, Captain America found and worked the controls that opened the door.

A man in a business suit was staring at him in consternation when he stepped out onto the chill gray sidewalk. "You! What are you doing in my store?"

"I beg your pardon." Captain America smiled. "I'd appreciate it if you'd call an ambulance. I have a badly injured man here."

"But, but," the man sputtered. "That's my freight elevator, my warehouse! It hasn't been opened in years! What do you think you...?"

"What's going on here?" a new voice inquired. It was a uniformed policeman, the cop on the beat. "Oh, hello there, sir." He nodded at Captain America.

"You're just the man I wanted to see," Captain America said. "I've got a man here" —he gestured into the gloom of the elevator—"and he needs medical attention. Will you get an ambulance?"

"I'll phone in right now, sir," the policeman nodded.

"But, but, my warehouse," the man was still protesting. "What's been going on in my warehouse?"

Captain America was already striding off down the street. The cop nudged the other man with his billy club. "Better pipe down, fellow. Looks like there's trouble here."

"Who was that man, in that wild get up?"

"You don't know who that is? That's Captain America, that's all," the cop said. He shook his head, as if in total disbelief of such ignorance.

When he got to the bank, Captain America made directly for Gaughan's office. A startled secretary stepped back as he pushed open the door without knocking. Except for her, the room was empty.

"Where's Gaughan?"

"Oh, you startled me! Why, you must be Captain America!"

He smiled, patiently. The tantalizing smell of coffee lingered in the room, reminding him of his hunger. "I'm looking for Mr. Gaughan," he said.

"Oh, he's in the director's office," the girl said. "He's in conference," she added in confusion.

"Will he be long?"

"I—I have no idea."

The door opened.

"Ah," Captain America said. "Just the man I was looking for." John B. Gaughan stopped in the doorway.

"Captain America! You're alive!"

"Yes, just barely."

"We'd had reports—half the tunnels are totally caved in. We've got men down there now, digging." He shook his head distractedly. "How did you get out? Did you bring any of the others with you?"

Rogers held up his hand. "One at a time. I—do you have, could you send for some coffee?"

The girl nodded. "I'll get you some. Can I get anything else? Coffee cake?"

"Yes, fine." He returned his attention to Gaughan. "I managed to dig my way out of a cave-in." He shrugged down at his dirt-smeared uniform. "I brought out one of your men. He's suffering from the effects of the explosion. The others? I don't know about one of them—he went up a ladder to the building above. But the one with me, I'm afraid he's..."

"Dead?"

"Yes."

"Couldn't you *do* anything?"

“Mr. Gaughan, I may wear a fancy uniform, but I cannot see through walls, stop bullets with my skin, or do any of those other comic-book things. My strength, my powers of recuperation, my reflexes—they’re all superior, but they’re not superhuman.”

“So a man died.”

“Two men died. We’d caught one of the gold robbers. The explosion went off before I could get anything from him?”

“Two men died then, and you escaped.” Twin patches of angry color dotted Gaughan’s cheeks. “I sent those men down with you. What am I going to tell their wives? I...”

The phone on his desk rang.

“Yes?” He turned in his chair to stare directly at Captain America. “Yes, I see. Yes, thank you. Thank you, sir.” He hung up.

“That was the local precinct. After you showed up with one of my boys in bad shape, they sent a couple of men through the nearby buildings. They found another of our men, Thomas. He was in the hall of a building. The front hall. Dead. He’d been shot.”

“The one who went upstairs...” Rogers mused. “Shot, you say?”

“Three times.”

“Then whoever triggered that explosion must’ve been in the same building. He must’ve surprised the man.”

“Thompson has been with us five years. He was a trusted employee. He had a wife and three children. The youngest can’t be a year old yet.” Gaughan struck his desk with his fist, a surprising gesture, coming from him. “We don’t hire these men to risk their lives. They wear guns, but that’s largely a precautionary measure. Two of them dead, the other in the hospital.” He shook his head. “I’m afraid I’ll have to consider you responsible, sir.”

In a midtown hotel room, two men rested on twin beds, their shoes off, watching a TV set across the room. They had the bland look of corporation men. Each looked younger than his age; one was dark-haired, the other blond. Their luggage was stacked in the clothes closet. The bottom suitcase held a neatly stowed-away laser-gun unit.

The phone rang, and the blond-haired man reached for it. "Yeah?" He listened quietly for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, sure. We'll meet you in the bar. Ten minutes. Sure."

He hung up.

"Our money?" the other asked.

Blondy shook his head. "More work." He swung around and sat up. He nudged his partner. "Come on, let's go. We gotta see the Sparrow downstairs, in ten minutes."

"So, ten minutes. How long can it take in the elevator?"

The blond-haired man grinned and laughed. "Move it. It'll take you half that time to get your shoes on." He tied his own, and slung on his shoulder holster. He tested the action, slipping his 38 magnum revolver in and out several times. The spring clip worked fine.

CHAPTER 9

ROBIN'S SONG

As they approached the corner booth in the fashionably dim-lit hotel bar, Bloody saw that Sparrow was not alone; another man and a girl were with him. Seeing Sparrow sitting with them, he was reminded again of the appropriateness of the man's cover name; the little man looked like a bookkeeper or a bank clerk, not at all like one of the Eagle's top lieutenants. They slid into the curved seat. "Ah, there you are, boys," Sparrow said cheerfully. "I'd like to introduce you to a couple of my associates. Randolph and Marcus, this is Starling and Robin." He turned to the couple on his other side and explained, "Randolph and Marcus were loaned us by Chicago." He turned back to the pair of Ivy-League hoods.

"Starling and Robin will be working with you on your new assignment. Actually, you'll be working under Starling on this occasion. It's his job. Miss Robin will assist you."

Randolph—Blondy—tried to size the girl up in the dim light. He could tell little. She wore shoulder-length strawberry-blonde hair. Her features seemed slightly exotic, but she wore simple glasses that tended to obscure the effect. She gave him a half-smile, her lips quirking up on one side. Her severely tailored business suit did not hide the fullness of her figure.

“If I might regain your attention...?” It was the fastidious bald man speaking—Starling. “We have an operation to be planned.”

Steve Rogers wiped his mouth and pushed himself away from the table. He’d eaten his fill now. Jarvis began clearing the dishes away, his movements silent, as if aware that he must not intrude upon Rogers’ thoughts.

His thoughts were largely unpleasant ones. He had gone from the bank to a conference with the police and the local head of the Treasury Department. It had not been a fruitful meeting.

He could tell them little; only what he had discovered, and what had happened to himself. They had little to add. The entire block of buildings on Liberty Place had been searched. The elevator had been tested. It was found to have been dropped down into an abandoned BMT subway tunnel—one never completed and long forgotten. When the elevator was up above, the tunnel beyond was open, and traces had been found of a man’s passage through a newly broken hole into the main subway line. This must have been the exit used by the man who had smuggled out the gold seal. A search of FBI fingerprint records revealed him to be one Andrew “Monk” Mayfair, a West Coast trigger-man with a long record. But there was nothing to connect him with this operation.

An upstairs room in a building two doors south of the warehouse—the building in which Ray Thompson’s body had been found—had shown signs of occupancy: a cot, a wardrobe, a dresser, all from the Salvation Army, and a phone which the telephone company had put in two months earlier in the name of Henry Starling. In the basement of the same building was a blocked shaft which presumably led down to the underground room. A set of wires came up the

shaft and were clipped directly and illegally to an outside telephone company line.

Digging was still underway, but they hadn't yet got through to the underground room. It would be hours yet before the remains of the other two bodies could be recovered. There were no clues to the whereabouts of the missing gold. An inventory showed the amount missing to be worth almost eight-hundred thousand dollars. "Apparently just a preliminary haul," the Treasury man had observed wryly.

They had nipped the operation in the bud; a mere four-fifths of a million missing. And at the cost of two men, and another in the critical ward. It was nothing to be proud about. Gaughan's words kept ringing in Steve Rogers' head: *"You are responsible."*

He was responsible.

He had led two good men, family men, to their deaths. And he had lost the only man who could have told them where the gold was. They were still digging, traces, clues might be found. But he doubted it. The responsibility was his. And he'd botched it.

The FBI was checking on Monk Mayfair's recent associations, searching out the connections that had brought him to New York. There might be a lead there, a path might open up to Mayfair's employers. But if it did, it would be the FBI's baby. It required days and weeks of careful footwork in which the FBI excelled. There was nothing there for Captain America.

There was so little to go on—the gold seal, the tunnels themselves. About all it told him was that someone had great daring, great technical skills. Using a laser beam for an assassination! And using it to cut through the concrete floor of the vault as well. This wasn't a common, unimaginative, syndicate job. It had been planned by a man with daring, and a man with the scientific know-how

available to put his fantastic plan into operation. Who could it be?

Jarvis strode silently into the room again. "The phone, sir. The police, downtown." He took it on the extension.

"A couple of patrolmen who have the squad car on that beat," his caller told him. "They remember seeing a car parked on Liberty Place the night Mayfair was killed. Reason they remember it, it was parked there from early evening until sometime after midnight. They were going to ticket it, but it had diplomatic plates. A black, '66 Lincoln Continental."

"Do they remember the license number?"

"Nope; didn't take it down. But we're checking the registry for a Continental with DPL tags. There'll be a god's plenty of 'em, that's for sure."

It was a lead; it might develop into something solid, and it might not. But there was still nothing in it for now.

"The phone again, sir." It was Jarvis. "A young lady. She refuses to identify herself, but wished to speak with you."

A girl! Could it be *the* girl? The girl who worked for S.H.I.E.L.D., the Supreme Headquarters International Espionage Law-enforcement Divisions, whose life he had twice saved* without learning her name, and whose face reminded him of another girl he had known and lost, a lifetime before?

But when he heard her voice, he knew it was not she.

"Captain America? I must see you! I have valuable information for you."

"Who is this?"

"My name doesn't matter, you don't know me anyway. I'm a SHIELD agent, and I've managed to work my way into a fantastic organization run by a man who calls himself the Eagle. Of his highly placed agents, I've met two—Sparrow

and Starling.” Her voice was breathless. “I haven’t time to talk long. Where can we meet?”

“You could come here.”

“I dare not. I think they’re watching your place. They killed one man who tried to get through to you.”

“Did you...?”

“I sent him, yes. You found the gold seal, I know. But there’s so much *more*.”

Steve thought quickly. This could be a trap, but even if it was, it would lead him to the very people he sought. It would be best to play along. Besides, the girl might be telling the truth, in which case...

“Where do you suggest?”

“It’s got to be where we can talk, where no one can bug us. How about the United Nation Plaza? You know, where all the benches are? It must be deserted at this hour”—Rogers glanced at the clock; it was 9:07—“and it’s convenient.”

“All right. How soon can you get there?”

“I’ll have to get free here. Give me forty-five minutes. Okay?”

“Nine-fifty?” “Right.”

There was a click, and the line was dead.

The Stark mansion was deceptive from the outside. A passerby would see it only as a town house. It was larger than its neighbors, being almost twice as wide, but its brownstone facade was set back from the quiet, tree-shaded side street, its miniature front yard, filled with ivy and shrubbery, filling the gap to the sidewalk. All the other houses on this block sat flush with each other. If one looked closely at the fittings—the brass door knocker, the stained-glass fanlight over the door, the dragon’s-claw foot-scraper at the side of the porch—one saw undeniable quality. The

house appeared to be carefully kept as well. The woodwork was all freshly painted, unstained by the city's soot and corrosive air. The windows were all sparkling clean, despite the fact that almost all were discreetly shaded by rich draperies.

But this view from the street showed only a wealthy town house. An aerial view would have shown much more.

Most of the houses on this block had back yards. These were small, but big enough for patios, a flower garden, even a small swimming pool. Each back yard abutted the back yard of the house on the opposite side of the block.

Both the house to the east, and the one to the west of the Stark mansion did not have back yards. Instead, they had high walls that extended to the center of the block on their outside property lines, where they met identical walls from the houses that backed them up. An aerial view would show that these two houses, and their counterparts on the opposite side of the block, extended back the full distance of their property, their backs directly touching. This, along with the two houses behind the Stark mansion itself, made up a square within the center of the block. And the open area between the back of the Stark mansion and the two houses opposite was a private plaza, with a landscaped garden.

Stark owned all seven houses, owned them in a block, and joined them so that their interiors were entirely linked to form one huge mansion, a bastion of complete privacy within the heart of the city.

Only portions of this vast building complex were used for living purposes—although each Avenger had his own apartment of rooms—for much of the remainder was taken up with labs, training areas, assembly rooms, and shops. Beneath the entire structure was an immense underground garage.

It was to the garage that Steve Rogers, back in a clean uniform, went now. The exit of the garage was not on the street on which the mansion fronted but on the street on the opposite side of the block, the next street north. Rogers could have instructed the girl to come to one of the addresses on that street, but he had sensed her reluctance to come into his own sanctum sanctorum. She had her own reasons for wanting to meet him elsewhere. He hoped he was wrong about what those reasons might be, but he had not wanted to scare her off. He had let her choose the place.

He stepped out of the elevator into a vast open area broken only by supporting columns and blocks of fluorescent lights, under which the hoods and bodies of many cars and vehicles gleamed darkly. Tonight he wanted something inconspicuous. He chose the Volkswagen.

The aluminum Buick V-6 engine started immediately, its ingenious muffler system accurately duplicating the sounds of a VW air-cooled flat-4. A special chain that ran uselessly between the fan and two dummy pulleys even re-created the distinctive sounds of the VW timing chain. He left the knob controlling the Paxton supercharger out; he wouldn't need that extra performance boost just yet. The 176 horsepower of the hot-tuned V6 would be enough, even for the specially modified and heavier chassis of the bullet-proofed VW. He moved his shield to the back seat, where it could not slide into his legs, and engaged the clutch. The car moved easily out across the open floor, and up the ramp, where the outside door, responding to the signal from the car's dash, was already up. Then he was turning east and heading crosstown.

There was no sign of pursuit, but just to be careful, he did not head directly for his destination. Instead he swung down into the midtown area, cutting through lights just turning yellow, watching for signs of anyone following, either directly on his tail, or a block away on the parallel. It was

9:45 when he turned north of First Avenue at 38th Street and, swinging into an outside lane to avoid the tunnel under 42nd Street drew up beside the U.N. rotunda.

There were only a few other cars parked here at this hour, most of them carrying the diplomatic licenses of the various legations located nearby. He drew the VW into the curb and parked it, retrieving his shield from the back seat. It was a replacement shield for the one he'd lost in the cave-in; he always kept spares.

When he entered the parklike plaza, the street lights from the avenue cast long shadows from the trees and plantings. At first he didn't see her. There she stood, her full figure separating itself from the shrouded shadows of a bench.

"Captain America?" she called softly.

He walked toward her, the sound of his boots on the hard concrete loud in his own ears.

When he was closer, he could see full dark-blond hair framing her face which itself remained shadowed. Light glinted from the lenses of her glasses. She was wearing a tailored business suit, and carrying a small purse.

"Captain America?" She smiled. "I'm Robin." She clutched her purse tighter, and suddenly a vapor shot out of it, surrounding him in a mist.

"You were easy," she said, as he started to fall.

Then, before she could regain her guard, he had rolled to the side, and was rising from his crouch. His shield held high on his left arm, his right hand knocked the purse from her grasp. It hit the pavement and slid away from her clutching fingers.

Then Randolph and Marcus were on his back.

Marcus was grunting as he swung his sap. "I toldja it wouldn't be that easy!"

"Ahhh—!"

Captain America pivoted, suddenly slippery as an eel. This was his game they were playing now—no gas, no sudden explosions, just a close rough-and-tumble. He swung his fist at the blond man, catching him high on the jaw, and driving him back to the pavement. But before he could follow up the blow, the other one was on his back again. He ducked, throwing the man over his shoulders, pitching him into the other, who was starting to rise. “When’ll you guys learn not to hit a man when his back’s turned?” he grunted, gathering the nearest in his fist, and chopping him with a series of hard, fast rights.

“Is this it?” he asked. “Are you guys all they sent?” He knocked their heads together and dropped them to the ground, unconscious. “It hardly seems worth coming out on a cold night for.”

“Maybe *this* will,” he heard the girl mutter. But he hadn’t time to react. The heel of her shoe caught him at the base of his skull, at the neck. He dropped as though poleaxed.

“Good job, guys.” The girl spoke in derision as she looked down on the unconscious bodies of her two helpers. “Maybe I should just leave you here for the cops. Not likely. That’d be doing them a favor.”

Lifting her short skirt higher on her thighs, she ran awkwardly out of the plaza to a dark Continental. “Starling!” She rapped on the rear side window. “Hey! You’ve gotta help me.”

Starling pressed a button and rolled his window down. “What is it?”

“Come on. I got three guys out cold back there. If you think I can handle them all by myself...”

With Starling’s help, the two thugs, looking much worse for the wear, were dumped in the back seat, Captain America between them. Starling opened the glove compartment and removed a small black case. From it he

took a loaded hypodermic. With a knife, he slashed the arm of Captain America's uniform, baring his skin.

Then he gave him the injection. "That should keep him cold for six hours," he told the girl. "And he won't be feeling like much for the next eighteen."

Robin slid into the front seat next to him and he started the big car, moving it out onto the one-way avenue, heading uptown.

They had turned onto the FDR Drive, heading downtown, when Randolph woke up. He announced this fact to the others in the car by vomiting on the floor.

"What a stink," the girl said. "Clean it up!"

"So stop the car for a minute and I'll be better," he groaned. But Starling didn't, and Randolph had to be content with using tissues while Robin sneered at him about his manliness, or his lack thereof. And Randolph, unable to put up with this kind of criticism, demonstrated his manliness by taking his frustrations brutally out on the unconscious form of Captain America.

Somewhat later that evening, after ticketing an illegally parked Volkswagen, a policeman discovered a small black ladies' purse in the United Nation Plaza. When he opened it, a gas bomb exploded in his face, leaving him a huddled form on the cold concrete.

* It all happened in *Tales of Suspense* #'s 75, 76, 77, March, April, May, 1966, and #85, January 1967.—Reminiscent Stan.

CHAPTER 10

UNMASKED!

When the black Continental drew up inside the Raven's garage, Starling and Robin watched while Randolph and Marcus hauled Captain America's limp body from the car. They pulled him out feet first, his back and shoulders scraping over the car's door sill, his head snapping back against the concrete floor with an ominous *thunk*.

"Careful, you fools," Robin said. "The Eagle wants him captured—not killed. Not yet, anyway."

Raven stared down at the costumed figure lying on his floor. Captain America's body looked even bigger in this odd position. "I don't get it," he complained. "Why take him alive? Why not just deliver a clean hit? And if we gotta keep him in storage, why here?"

Starling smiled. "I'm afraid that if the Eagle wanted you to know, he'd have informed you."

"Hah! I'm betting you don't know either, fella."

"Starling! Raven!" It was Robin. "Please. This is no time for pettiness."

"Speaking of time," said Starling, glancing at his chromium-steel wrist chronometer, "where's Sparrow? He's overdue."

Marcus had gone over near the doors. "Hey, somebody's poking around out there." His gun was in his hand as he spoke.

“Put the gun away, idiot,” Raven snorted. “You’re paid to follow instructions—not to think.” He unbolted the doors, and inched one open. “Oh, it’s you.”

“I’m sorry to be late,” Sparrow said apologetically, as he pushed in through the narrow gap. “I’m not familiar with the subways in Brooklyn.”

“What could be easier?” Raven asked. “The 4th Avenue line runs right up there along Fourth Avenue. You’re two blocks away.”

“I got on the wrong train when I changed. The—um—West End Line, I believe.”

Raven shook his head. It was plain he had little respect for the fussy and incapable Sparrow. “Well, we’re all here, anyway. I mean, all of us except the boss.”

“I’ve never seen the Eagle,” Robin spoke up. “When am I going to meet him?”

“None of us have,” Sparrow replied in a kindly tone which he seemed to reserve for the girl. “His dealings with all of us have been over the phone. I have worked for him more years than the rest of you put together, and I’ve never met him. We are hardly his only um—employees. We simply represent the lieutenants for this operation.”

“Well, what about this operation?” Starling asked. “It’s finished, isn’t it?”

“Ah, that’s one of the things we have to discuss,” Sparrow said, shaking his head. “But first, there is the matter of our energetic friend on the floor.”

“What about him?” Raven asked. He drew the back of his hand over his stubbled jowls, then ran his fingers through his dirty blond hair. “Why are we holding him? And why here?”

“It bothers you?” Sparrow asked.

“It sure does. I’ve heard about this guy. He causes trouble. There are plenty who’d pay us good money to see

him dead, and if it was somebody else holding him, I'd ante something into the pot myself, just on general principles. Here he is, lying right here on the floor, in the midst of a high-level meeting like this. It's ridiculous! Besides, this is my garage."

"Relax," Starling said. "He's full of juice. Nothing can go wrong."

"That's what you said when you dropped that dynamite on him."

"Gentlemen, please!" Sparrow held his hands aloft, summoning their attention. "The Eagle's reasons for wanting to keep Captain America our hostage are, I am sure, reasonable and sufficient. We needn't question them. However, I am aware that one of his reasons is that Captain America is highly valued by the law enforcement agencies of this country, and would provide an excellent exchange hostage, should any one of us—ah—become enmeshed in the traps of the law.

"As to your fear, Raven, I believe it is groundless. The 'juice' to which Starling refers, should be quite effective in rendering Captain America totally helpless."

"Well, where'm I gonna put him?"

"I suggest we take him down to your apartment, and tie him to a chair."

When Captain America regained consciousness, it was not all at once.

First there was a heavy, sluggish, dreamy quality to his awareness. It was vaguely as he remembered it when a dentist had given him gas. He had not gone completely under, but had become somewhat removed from the reality of what the dentist was doing to his teeth.

Just so—a man was hitting him. He couldn't be sure if more than one man was hitting him, because the blows

seemed unconnected one to another, and the drone of the man's curses added up to nothing. He felt no personal animosity toward the man who was hitting him. He registered the blows to his ribs, his kidneys, his stomach, without feeling them. There was no pain, only a sort of irregular, ceaseless jarring.

He didn't try to reason it out; that part of his brain was dead. He only experienced. He drifted, the jars and blows turbulences in the dreamlike current that carried him.

But gradually the shock, if not the pain of the body blows, began to cut through the mist of his mind. Like touches of ice in a steam bath, they restored contrast and, with that, greater consciousness.

He was propped in a sitting position, between two other bodies; occasionally he would feel the weight of one against him pushing him into the other, as they all swayed. There was a sour, sickly odor, although chill wind blasted against him. The man on his right was hitting him, steadily if neither regularly nor methodically. The other man seemed to be holding him. He couldn't move. He couldn't open his eyes. His body felt paralyzed. From the sounds that filtered through his consciousness, he decided they were in a car.

Someone else—a female voice—said something sharp.

The blows ceased. Without them, he lost some of his impetus toward wakefulness, but did not lose consciousness entirely. Instead, he drifted back into the deeper waters, coming near the surface only when the car's direction or its speed would abruptly change. Even when the road surface became suddenly rougher he was roused only momentarily. The outside stimuli which reached him were incapable of exciting him.

Then the car had stopped. Without warning; hands roughly seized him, gripping his ankles and pulling them. He felt his body slip, flopping him flat on his back on the car seat, and then his ankles were jerked impatiently as he was

dragged from the car. For a moment he was falling, free. Then his head struck the pavement.

The drug Starling had used on Captain America was a narco-depressant, a synthetic originally developed for use on drug addicts. Unfortunately, its side effects made it unpopular for this use, and it languished for several years until rediscovered by the Russian KGB for use not unlike that to which Starling had put it.

There was no particular secret about the drug, although it was now being used under several different trade names, and not only SHIELD, but various national agencies in the U.S. employed it upon occasion. It was inevitable that it would find its way into criminal hands; most of the world's drug discoveries do, often even before any public announcement or release.

There was only one objection to using the drug on Captain America; it didn't really work.

The drug normally enters the brain through the bloodstream, and attacks the nerve centers at the top of the spinal cord and the base of the brain. Its properties are largely anesthetic, but it also acts as a general depressant, reducing capillary circulation throughout the body, and most particularly in the brain.

But Captain America possessed an altered body. In his strengthened body, the influx of many drugs is treated much as would be the unwarranted entrance of any foreign object; antibodies are formed which attack and destroy the foreign object—in this case, the drug.

This was not done instantly. A massive dose had been injected directly into his bloodstream. He was already unconscious. Some of the drug was able to act upon him, unimpaired. It would be a matter of time—perhaps more than an hour—before the drug would be cleared from his

bloodstream. It would be longer before all its effects had worn off. And they would not all disappear simultaneously. Repeated brain concussions from blows to the cranium would have their own effects as well. There was the possibility of blood clots forming in brain tissues. In a normal man, a head blow sufficient to cause unconsciousness can leave the victim with migraine headaches, dizzy spells and occluded vision, or minor sight difficulties, for days afterwards. It was fortunate for Captain America that he was no longer a “normal” man.

His hearing returned first, and imperfectly. There was a buzzing to every sound he heard, like distortion in a sound system, a radio not properly tuned. Voices cut and rasped, their meanings elusive.

Then bodily sensation. He was sitting again, in a straight chair. Tight bands—ropes, he guessed—held his hands behind the chair’s back. The stiff chair back cut into the insides of his arms. His hands had very little feeling.

More ropes held his legs to the chair legs, and bound his thighs to the seat. He was thoroughly trussed up.

He didn’t try to move or struggle. He didn’t lift his chin from his chest. Even his breathing didn’t quicken.

He knew he was in the den of thieves. It seemed important for the time being to lie doggo, to wait and listen.

“I don’t like it,” Starling was saying. “Of all of you, only I am familiar with the actual physical operation. Only I have seen the vaults, worked in the tunnels. And we don’t know how changed they are now. For instance, will the cart still go through?”

Raven laughed. “You’re forgetting, the cart was in your storeroom. It’s buried now. And if it isn’t, they’ve probably taken it out. We can’t count on it. We’ll have to take more in.”

"I don't know," Robin's softer voice came. "I'm newest on this operation. But it seems to me that Starling has a point. All we know is that the main tunnel between the elevator and the vault is clear—for men to get through, anyway. We don't know what conditions are like down there. We've already gotten a haul that anyone else would be satisfied with."

"Not just *anyone!*" Sparrow's voice, surprisingly crisp, cut through the conversation. "You're overlooking something. This is not *our* operation. These are not *our* plans. And you are not totally aware of my own role in the situation. In any case, the Eagle has made these plans, and cast his vote. I need not remind you, his is the decisive, the *only* vote. So this argument is really quite pointless. We had best get onto the mechanics of it. We'll need more trucks. Raven, that's your department. Starling, you'll round up your work crew. We'll need more men. I want a constant stream of men loading and unloading—a steady flow to the trucks. I'll take care of the power cut."

"Wait a minute..." Starling said.

"What about me?" Robin interrupted.

Sparrow smiled at her. "You'll stay here to keep the home fires burning, my dear. And, incidentally, to guard our captive, here."

She pouted. "That doesn't seem very important."

"You'll also be our message center. We'll need someone to coordinate things, someone we can all get through to."

"Why, Sparrow, I didn't think you had so much to you," Raven said with delight. "You've positively taken charge!" He laughed.

"What's got into you?" Starling asked, testily.

"It's a nice split, boys. Had you forgotten? Sixty per cent of the net to the Eagle; ten to each of the rest of us. Ten per cent of eight-hundred thousand; that's only eighty

thousand. But have you tried working out ten per cent of over twelve billion? People, you're looking at billionaires! That's worth a few chuckles, ain't it?"

"What will you do with your share, Raven?" Robin asked curiously.

"I figure on buying me an island in the South Pacific," he said happily.

"Maybe they'll use it to test a new bomb on," Starling rejoined.

"Enough," Sparrow said, his thin voice again cutting through the dissension. "That's quite enough. We have one other item of business yet to attend to."

Rogers heard footsteps scuffing across a thick carpet, and then Sparrow's voice again, almost directly over him.

His ears still buzzed, but he fought to catch the elusive familiarity of the man's tone. He wished he dared open his eyes.

"This is a moment which I, personally, have long awaited," Sparrow said, his voice rising in triumph. "*The unmasking of Captain America!*"

Then, his nails scraping along Rogers' face, Sparrow dug his fingers under his cowl, and ripped it back. Rogers felt air strike his exposed cheeks and forehead. Then fingers clutched his blond hair and pulled his head back. "Behold!" Sparrow said.

Raven was first to speak. "Well, I dunno about you, Sparrow, but it rings no bells with me. I never seen him before."

Starling agreed. "His face means nothing to me."

"He could be anybody," said Robin. "What good does this do?"

Sparrow let Rogers' head fall back to his chest, and his voice when he spoke was defeated. "I don't know. Nothing, I

guess. I always wondered. I felt, if these guys—these costumed heroes—wore masks, it must mean something.”

“Captain America was missing for twenty years,” Starling said. “That could mean the first one died, and this one took his place. He looks awfully young.”

“Perhaps. It doesn’t really matter. Let’s get going.”

The carpet muffled their footsteps, but when it sounded as though they had all left, Captain America opened one eye, and peered upward—straight into the eyes of the young woman who called herself Robin.

Her open-handed slap threw his head back on his shoulders. He opened both eyes and stared at her. She stared back, angrily. He noted with interest that her eyes were brown at the pupil, but shaded into blue at the rim of the iris. She wasn’t wearing her glasses, and her hair fell part-way across her face. She was quite beautiful, in a not quite sane sort of way.

“So you’re awake?” She made it an accusation. “So much for Starling’s much-vaunted injections.”

“You never did get a chance to tell me what it was you’d called me about,” Rogers said. “Why not take the opportunity?”

In reply she slapped him again. Now both sides of his face stung.

“Don’t talk to me,” she told him. “Don’t say a word. I’d love to have an excuse to shut you up, permanently.”

She reached behind her for the gun lying on a small end table. “You were supposed to be no trouble at all. ‘Out for six hours,’ that slimy rat said. Sure! And now I’ve got to keep a double eye on you while I tend to the rest of my business.”

“Last chance,” Rogers said, his voice stony. “Replay the scene. You were just an agent for SHIELD who penetrated

this operation, and had to go along with it in front of the others. Now, of course, you're free. You can tell me all the details, and set me loose. That's your chance—to play it that way."

She stared mockingly at him. "And the other way?"

"They've abolished the death sentence in this state, but you can still get thirty years to life as an accessory to murder."

"I haven't killed you—yet."

"I said *accessory*. Your friend, the Starling, has killed at least three men so far. One of them he shot in cold blood." He gave her a grim smile. "You ever been in a women's penitentiary? It's not the most attractive place in the world. You think men can be tough? Try some of those sadistic matrons—and your cell mates; they can give you a real rough time of it. And there's no escape."

She stared at him broodingly, saying nothing. Her face seemed whiter.

"I'm offering you an out," he said quietly. "It's the best you'll get."

CHAPTER 11

THE SCREAMING MACHINES

It was shortly after midnight that the anonymous late-model Ford turned off the FDR Drive at Houston Street, cutting west. Riding in the car with Sparrow were Randolph and Marcus. Marcus was checking out a bulky suitcase, the side of which had a set of electrical connections. Randolph was working with the contents of the other suitcase.

The weather had suddenly turned warm, a hollow echo of Indian summer. Gusty sou'wester breezes pushed through the half-open windows of the car. The East River, when they had come over the Brooklyn Bridge, had been obscured by fog, the bridge lights pale misty moons. Clouds of fog were blowing in from the river as they left it now, heading west on Houston.

At Avenue D, Sparrow swung the car right, heading north again. This was the worst part of the East Side, but at this hour all but deserted. Trash blew unhindered in the streets, rising in small clouds behind the car.

At 14th Street, they turned east again.

There is only a short block between Avenue D and the FDR Drive at 14th Street. On the south side sits a huge transformer switch yard, guarded by a high fence. On the north side sits the main Manhattan Consolidated Edison power generating plant. Even now its tall stacks belched pollution into the air. The city regularly fined the monolithic

utility company, but Con Ed only shrugged, paid the fines, and added them to its already staggering consumer bills. Across the Drive, nestled between it and the East River, almost obscured by the fog now, and only a hulking blotch of darkness, was a coal elevator, into which coal was dumped from river barges. The coal was hauled up several stories and conveyor-belted across the Drive into the power plant, where it was burned, supplying energy for the giant generators that supplied most of Manhattan's electric power, and then becoming soot, falling gently from the air onto thousands of window sills across the island.

It was a blot upon the city, Marcus felt. He felt a kind of boyish glee at what they were about to do. Perhaps someday the city would thank him. It was a thought worth smiling about.

Ralph Amberson, at fifty-three, was senior engineer in charge of the midnight-to-eight shift at the 14th Street plant. Four regular men worked under him—Milton Krankowitz, forty-eight; Jeff Jones, forty-four; Julius Postal, thirty-six; and Mark Redwing, forty. Ralph didn't like Jones; he had no use for most Negroes. Jones did his job fine, but there was no denying that he didn't belong there. Neither did that young Turkish Jew, Postal. The city was overrun with foreigners anyway. Look at them, not an honest name in the lot. Krankowitz, a Pole; Redwing—well, with a name like that, he had to have Indian blood, even if he didn't show it.

Amberson was not a prejudiced man, he'd have you know. He didn't hold with the way they did things down south, and Hitler—well, the man was an insane murderer, and you couldn't make excuses for the extermination of six million Jews. On the other hand, now that they had their own country, why couldn't they stop sponging off the goodwill and charity of other countries? Postal! That man couldn't have known the war. He hadn't fought in it, the way

Ralph had. Why was he—and all the other Jews in the world—still trading on what happened over twenty years ago, still looking for the free ride?

He had never mentioned this to Julius, and he never would. It wasn't something a polite man would bring up, much less discuss. He wasn't a bigot. It was like he'd told his wife, Margaret, how could they call him a bigot? He lived on the same block with them. But it galled a man, nevertheless, to see the way they took over jobs, pushing their way in. They talked about anti-semitism, and discrimination against Negroes. He could show them a thing or two! How about that officious Negro clerk down at City Hall, when he'd tried to get a little action on a parking ticket? Hah! In *this* city, to get anywhere, you had to be Negro or a Jew. Then they leaned over backward. City Controller, Borough President, anything you wanted!

The outside door, just beyond his office, slammed. He dropped his newspaper and pushed to his feet. Before he could reach it, his door swung open, and a neatly dressed young man was standing in the doorway. What was the office doing, sending men around at this hour? Or was he from the city?

The neatly dressed young man pulled a revolver from under his arm. It was blued steel. The barrel was five inches long. It looked longer.

"You in charge here, Pop?"

"Yes, I...What's going on?"

The terrifying gun exploded. Ralph Amberson's body was driven back against his desk, his spine smashed, arms flailing. The bullet left a hole in the wall beyond. The hole was ringed with bits of flesh and blood.

Sparrow had explained it to them. "No witnesses. This is the biggest job that's ever been pulled. It'll make the Brinks

robbery look like peanuts. We're blacking out a whole city, just to pull it off. We don't need witnesses."

He was in his element now. There had been only five men they could find. He'd held one of them, a Negro, at bay with his own gun, while the two gunmen had gone hunting for the other three, their guns sounding occasionally over the throbbing roar of the generators. "Just five of you, eh?" he'd asked. The Negro had nodded, sweat pouring down his face.

"You wouldn't be holding one or two back?"

"I wish I had."

"Don't be stupid."

"You're gonna kill me anyway, right?"

"Make it easy for yourself. Don't make it hard."

"Why should I? Why should I make it easy for *you*?" Jones leaped at him, clubbing at Sparrow's gun hand with one arm, going for his body with the other.

Sparrow had to admire the fellow's guts. He lifted his knee and chopped with his gun hand, driving the other's head down, smashing the man's nose. Then, as he collapsed at Sparrow's feet, Sparrow put a bullet through the back of his head.

That had taken care of the opposition. Now for the work.

Randolph had assembled the laser gun from the second suitcase with care. Now he plugged its leads to the power pack in the other suitcase, and handed the weapon to Sparrow.

It didn't look like much. It consisted mainly of a tube. It was one of the new gas types that didn't use a jewel. Energy was pumped into the tubular chamber. It was converted into photons—light particles. These bounced back and forth between the mirrors at each end of the chamber until they were perfectly aligned, and could escape at one end as congruent light.

With the tight red beam of light, diamonds could be cut, messages sent to the moon, anything. The possible uses of the laser as a tool or weapon are almost unlimited.

Sparrow used the beam to carve through solid inches of steel, to cut through the heavy maintenance shielding of the bearing assembly at the hub of one of the huge powerhouse generators. He used it to fuse and destroy the bearing upon which the giant generator rotor spun.

There were nine generators in the powerhouse. Without pause, he moved on to the next. And then the next.

The instant the bearing had been damaged on the first generator, imbalance was introduced to the tons of spinning mass that was the rotor. A vibration was set up.

When the bearing was destroyed, vast amounts of friction were quickly created by the spinning shaft. The rotor, no longer on a true course, began scraping against the fixed fields. Showers of sparks began to fly from the wobbling generator, while the bearing journal heated to a red glow. The vibration was shaking the steel mounts imbedded in concrete and, through the concrete, the whole structure of the powerhouse. A terrible screaming filled the air, the keening screech of tortured metal.

Very quickly the agonies of the first generator were joined by those of the others. The place sounded—felt—like a madhouse. Sparrow was laughing insanely, tears streaking his face.

Smoke was filling the great room, and with it the smell of burning rubber and ozone. Marcus grabbed Sparrow's shoulder, all but stumbling on the dancing surface of the vibrating floor.

"Boss!" he shouted into Sparrow's ear. *"We gotta get out!"*

Sparrow shook the man loose, but nodded, and beckoned toward the entrance. Stumbling, running, the three ran for

the doorway.

Outside the air was thick with fog, and the fog muffled the terrible death throes of the powerhouse. The pounding vibrations could still be felt through the pavement, but the machines were dying, and soon they would slow to a stop.

The street lights were already dimmer, Sparrow thought. Then he heard a pounding of footsteps running down the road. It was a guard, his gun drawn. "Hey! Hey you," he was shouting. Randolph shot him.

The lights had not dimmed appreciably. If anything, they were brighter. The noise of the generators was a great deal less now. The power was not off.

Inside the building, they could hear a phone ringing.

"It didn't work," Marcus said.

"They switched in another power source," Sparrow said.

"But, hey. We took care of all them guys."

"It was automatic. After the last power failure—the big one—they must've installed a lot of new equipment."

"So what do we do?"

"We find that equipment. We destroy it."

Randolph spoke. "Wait a minute. How about over there?" He gestured across the street. "How about them things—all them wires?"

Sparrow's face lit. "The transformers, of course! You're right! We'll try them. Bring the laser."

They cut a hole in the fence, and stepped through.

The transformer yard was an incredible jungle-gym gone mad. Metal lattices crossed and criss-crossed, wires weaving webs among them. And, squatting bulks in their midst, like fat spiders in the centers of their webs, stood the heavy transformers.

Sparrow triggered the laser, sweeping its sharp lance of light across the yard. The metal beams glowed only

momentarily from the heat, but thin wires snapped, a succession of rifle-shots in the foggy night.

Then he brought the beam to bear upon the nearest transformer. He trained it on the center of the dark object, watching in satisfaction as the heavy outer case of the transformer began to glow dully where the beam struck it.

Then, suddenly, the yard was brightly lit by showers of sparks. The transformer was arcing and spitting angrily, the outer case cracking, sparks flying. Then the whole transformer seemed to glow for a moment.

The street lights flickered, then dimmed perceptibly. The transformer ceased its showers of sparks, and its glow slowly dimmed.

There were only three transformers in the yard. The electrical displays as they shorted out internally were impressive.

On 63rd Street, in the Con Ed Energy Control System headquarters, a meter recorded a frequency drop in the power-net system. A load-shedding relay closed, and a link was cut from the system before it could drag the entire system into a second major blackout. Only two-thirds of Manhattan was affected. Only the lower two-thirds. It was late at night. Few people noticed.

And the fog rolled in, through darkened streets.

A police car, siren screaming, raced through the near-empty streets to the 14th Street plant. It was too late. The Ford carrying Sparrow, Randolph and Marcus had already left. Policemen poked flashlight beams incredulously through the wreckage of the transformer yards, and then moved silently past the dead bodies into the silent powerhouse.

When the lights died, Starling gave the signal, moving his car off Broadway onto Liberty Street, a caravan of trucks, led by Raven, following. The trucks turned up Liberty Place, the Continental hanging back until they had all entered, then moving across the narrow mouth of the street, blocking it.

The first truck rumbled to a stop in front of the warehouse door, and backed up onto the sidewalk. The truck's back doors swung open and five men jumped down, each carrying a small sub-machine gun. Raven hopped down from the cab. He unlocked the door, and two men laid down their guns and helped him push it up. The elevator was at the bottom of the shaft, a much more decrepit one now at ground level. Raven climbed up its side, and over its open top, cutting into the dead wires of its motor system, splicing in wires that ran to the back of the truck, where a gasoline-powered generator was turning over.

It was a smooth operation. There were no guards stationed in the tunnel. The lights in the vault were off, and the four guards stationed there were shot. They had only one bad moment, when a police car turned into Liberty Place from Maiden Lane. But then Sparrow's Ford turned in behind it, blocking it, and two officers in the car were marched down into the tunnels, where they were disposed of quietly and efficiently, without shots being heard on the street.

The men worked in teams, loading the heavy gold ingots onto carts which were then pulled down the long tunnel to the elevator, where they were taken to the street and the trucks. Each truck received several cartloads, the tonnage settling it heavily upon its springs. The men in the tunnels each carried guns in hip holsters. The men on the street patrolled each end of the block with their machine guns.

The fog was heavy, clammy now. The temperature had risen to a freak 67° from the below freezing of only hours

earlier. The working men had shucked their coats. Sparrow and Raven stood smoking on the street, watching each truck loaded. The police car and the Ford had been moved onto the sidewalks, allowing each truck in turn to rumble up the street and out of the narrow block. Each truck carried a driver, and a guard with a sub-machine gun. Each truck's engine labored under the load it pulled.

Captain America stared unblinkingly at the girl who faced him. A short cigarette was clenched between her lips.

"No," she said. "I told you—shut up. Stop telling me these things. It won't do you any good. What do you think, I'd turn informer and give up over a billion dollars? A billion dollars, Mister Goody-two-shoes! You know how many people in this world got a billion?"

"You must want it pretty bad."

"Why not? What do I have now? It's go for broke, fellow. You should know that. I'm in as deep as I'll ever be now."

"How did you get into this?"

She smiled. "What's a nice girl like me doing in a racket like this? You guess."

"Money, I suppose. That's the usual excuse."

"Excuse?"

"Sure. You think money will solve all your problems, whatever they may be, if you get enough of it. Funny thing, it never does. You just get new problems."

"Sure. Like, should I get a black Rolls Royce or a gold one."

"More likely, how will you make use of your billion?"

"Huh? Try that again, more slowly."

"What will you do with your billion in gold?"

The girl stared at him, as if at a simpleton. Rogers smiled.

“Ever try cashing a gold bar at your local neighborhood candy store?”

Robin’s mouth dropped, the cigarette falling, forgotten, to the carpet.

“Gold is illegal for private possession in this country,” Rogers pointed out, “except as jewelry, and things like that. Private ownership of gold in ingot form, or as any kind of money except rare coins in collections, is illegal. Maybe illegal ownership doesn’t bother you, but how will you convert it to spending money?” He nodded. “That’s the least of your problems, of course.”

“What do you mean?”

“A billion in gold, that’s not something you can carry around in your purse. Gold weighs almost as much as lead. It’s a soft, heavy metal. You know how much a billion in gold weighs? Well over eight hundred tons. You know how much a ton is? How will you transport it? Where will you keep it? If you want to get out of the country with it, how will you take it?” He sighed. “The life of a master crook is fraught with problems, you see.”

“I—I could grind it to powder, and claim I’d mined it.”

“High-quality gold like this? Uh-uh. Besides, gold is easily traceable. Gold from different areas differs in ways any expert can detect. This gold is highly refined. You’d have trouble explaining it as just a little something you’d panned from the creek out back.”

A tear squeezed out from one eye. “Damn you, damn you!” the girl cried. “Why do you have to do this? Why are you ruining everything?”

“There’s still my offer,” Rogers said. “There’s still an out. It doesn’t pay so well, but the security is a lot better.”

She turned her back on him and moved, almost stumbling, across the room to the kitchenette. He heard her pulling out drawers, and the sound of silverware as she dug

about. When she came back, she was holding a thin, wicked-looking knife.

CHAPTER 12

THE GREAT GOLD STEAL

Starling stood in the vault, holding the big twelve-cell hand torch, directing the operation. He was careful to keep the pool of light from the dead bodies of the bank guards. The vault had been locked on the inside. Now they were systematically stripping it.

Thirteen billion in gold is a great deal of gold. One billion was more than one thousand times the amount they had taken before. That eight-hundred thousand had been a tiny drop in the bucket. The total amount of gold here was over fifteen thousand times the amount they had taken before.

You couldn't load a truck anywhere near its volume capacity with the gold. Even now the trucks were overloaded in terms of weight. They had fifteen trucks. That was nowhere near enough. He wondered if they could possibly carry off this fantastic, last-ditch operation. It would depend on doing it without being caught. It would depend on the trucks making, many round trips apiece. They were heading out to Staten Island. It would be a round trip of several hours. It would be daylight before too much longer. The fog might help. It might not. His stomach was cramped, and his hand holding the light shook, making the beam seem to flicker. Cold sweat stood on his forehead, his clothes were damp with it. They'd have to take what they could and leave it at that. Thirteen billion was impossible.

He wondered why they were doing this. How could they possibly hope to succeed? There was only one satisfaction. They would be taking the gold to Staten Island, to the Eagle's retreat. At last he would be able to meet the Eagle!

Outside, Raven backed the last truck into place. He looked at his watch. 4:10. They couldn't hope to succeed much longer at this. The first truck would be returning soon. He should give a message to the driver of this truck to tell the rest not to come back. He shook his head.

"This is a crazy thing, huh?" he asked the Sparrow.

"How much you think we've taken out?"

"I've been keeping a rough count," Sparrow replied. "We've gotten maybe a couple of billion."

"Is that all? I'm gonna tell the driver of this heap not to come back. It'll be five by the time he gets there."

"*What?*" Sparrow's face twisted suddenly. "You dare to stop the operation?"

"Aw, come on! It'll be light inna couple more hours. You think we can go on all day?"

"We must complete this job!"

"Look, Sparrow, be reasonable, huh? You tell me. At this rate, when will we be hauling out the last load?"

Sparrow didn't answer the question. "We'll barricade the street, if necessary. We have a small army here."

"Sparrow! You crazy or something? How will we get the trucks out? They're just ordinary trucks, man. You think we gonna get them over the bridge and on the expressway, with every cop in the city knowing what's in 'em? Think! Our whole cover is darkness, secrecy. Like, we'd never get across one bridge, let alone two, if it got out what we're doin'."

Sparrow's shoulders slumped. "You're right," he sighed. "We've been lucky so far."

"Let's not push it," Raven agreed. "After all, ten percent of two or three billion ain't so bad. We're still millionaires. I can live on that." He chuckled again.

Rogers tensed as she leaned over him, but Robin didn't use the knife on him. Instead she cut his bonds.

He stumbled as he climbed from the chair. His legs were numb, and for a moment his ankles refused to support him. Then he was standing in the center of the room, looking down at the girl. Robin's lips trembled.

"I—I'm throwing it all away, aren't I?"

"On the contrary." He put his arms around her shoulders. Her body was shaking. "You've done the right thing. You've reached a decisive turning point for your life."

"I have, haven't I?" Her voice was thin and small, like a child's. "A—a second chance?"

"Yes." He stroked her back, soothing her.

"I always wanted to get out of this. It's like drugs—addictive. It catches you up and you can't let go. It's—it's being what you're not, and yet you can't find who you really are."

"It's all changed, now," Rogers told her.

"What do I do now?"

"The first thing is to wrap up this case," Rogers said. He reached back with stiff fingers and pulled his hood up and over his head, smoothing the cowl over his face.

"Why do you wear that?" she asked.

"The mask?" He smiled. "It gives people something external to concentrate upon."

"But...

“Without it, I’m just another ordinary-looking man. With it, I become a symbol. For some people, it creates awe; for others, fear. Look at me. I’m different now, aren’t I? With the mask on?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “You look—bigger somehow. Stronger. Fierce, implacable. You look a little scary.”

“Exactly. You no longer see me as a person, but as a thing—an Avenger. It can be a potent psychological weapon.”

“They were so disappointed, when they took your mask off. As though underneath they’d find a famous person.”

“Maybe that goes on TV—handsome playboys, and all that. But I’ve been anonymous all my life. Even my real name would be meaningless to you, to them. No, the mask is part of the uniform, a psychological device. That’s the whole story.

“Now let’s get out of here. You have a good deal more to tell me yet, and we can’t waste more time.”

A call brought a police car from the 68th Precinct to Raven’s Second Avenue garage. Captain America pumped the girl of what she knew, and left her in the custody of the police at the station. There he borrowed an unmarked car, and drove toward Manhattan.

The police had been alerted now, but if possible he would try to see the thing through to its end by himself. From what Robin had told him, two things demanded it.

First, Sparrow, Raven and Starling had a large gang of armed men. Any full-scale assault upon them would result in the possible loss of life of many brave policemen. He could not permit this if it was avoidable. Most of the fighting would undoubtedly have to take place in the tunnels. It would be too dangerous—a slaughterhouse.

Second, and equally important, a shadowy figure stood behind this entire criminal operation, the man known only

as the Eagle. Robin had told him that none of them, not even the Sparrow, had ever met the Eagle before. But the gold was to be taken to an estate on Staten Island—the Eagle’s own estate! This would be the best chance to catch the mastermind, who had so carefully until now held himself at arm’s length from involvement. To catch him with the stolen gold would be to implicate him in a way he’d never squirm out of. They’d have the whole gang, and all the goods, in one neat package. The thought pleased him.

The car was a 1966 Plymouth, a six-cylinder Belvedere. New York City had one of the few police departments in the country that bought six-cylinder cars. They were outfitted with taxi upholstery, and a calibrated speedometer, but otherwise standard. They were auctioned off after two years, or eighty thousand miles, whichever occurred first. They gave rugged, economical service, and were rarely driven over fifty miles an hour. Like the regular cruisers, this car had a radio. Rogers was now patched in directly to headquarters in downtown Manhattan, where the radio equipment was running off a basement Diesel generator. Unmarked cars similar to the one he was driving were standing by at the bridge and tunnel approaches. As he drove down Hamilton Avenue, under the expressway (it was faster than retracing his route to the expressway entrance), patches of fog swirling across the road before him, a scratchy voice filled him in over the radio.

“The Con Ed plant at 14th Street is a total wreck. Every generator completely smashed, ruined. The same goes for the electrical switching yard. The transformers are burnt-out husks. Con Ed says the whole thing is a complete loss. Six men were killed there—the five men on duty, and a foot patrolman.”

“Dangerous people we’re working with,” Rogers said. “That’s why we’re doing it my way. There’s no sense in sending more good men where those went.”

He nosed the car into the ramp down to the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. The radio static faded momentarily as he went through a short tunnel to pick up the main expressway. He drove with tight-fisted silence until signs pointed out the Brooklyn Bridge exit. He pulled the car into the tight curve of the ramp to the bridge at twice the posted exit speed, jockeying the car as the back end broke loose, skidded, and then straightened out, pointing directly up the right-hand lane of the bridge.

A slow-moving car, its taillights dim in the billowing fog, honked its horn at him as he barreled past, and he set the red flasher on his dash and turned it on.

There was no traffic waiting in the left lane at the Manhattan end of the bridge, but the traffic signals were still working, on a separate circuit apparently. It seemed strange to see the city streets so dark. He made a left through the red light, his own red flasher working, and cut through the Municipal Building, west on Chambers, for Broadway.

Again he turned left on a red, and continued to ignore the lights as he pushed the car down Broadway at forty-five, the highest speed he dared without using his siren.

He drew up short at Maiden Lane, pulling into the curb, and shutting off the lights and flasher. He was still in the car when a heavy truck lumbered across on Maiden Lane, its tires flattened under its load. He stared at the truck, memorizing its make and license number, then thumbed his radio sending switch.

"A 1952 Mack truck, heavy-duty van body," he told them, reciting its license tag number. "Heading west on Maiden Lane, probably turning uptown for the Manhattan Bridge. Check it out and see where it goes. Don't stop it."

He glanced at the dash clock. 2:15. They'd let the trucks pass through without interference. They'd let the crooks make a complete haul. There was no sense in complicating things. He waited, then a car pulled up alongside. A man

jumped out. He pulled open the other door, and slipped quickly in. "Okay," he nodded at Captain America. "I'm all set."

"Keep low. Don't let them see you."

"Right."

Rogers stepped quickly from the car and moved, through the fog, down the street.

The clammy air felt chill upon his bare arm, where Starling had cut his uniform sleeve, despite the sudden warmth that had hit the area. He moved around onto Liberty Street, staying close to the sides of the buildings.

In the middle of the block he saw overhead the slatted stairs of a fire escape. Perfect! He jumped, his muscles thrusting him high into the air, where he caught the bottom rung of the ladder. Flipping his body up, he swung his legs through the railings and pulled himself up. Soon he was standing on the bottom landing.

He climbed quickly, fleetly, being careful to make as little noise as possible. The last flight was a straight ladder that led him to the roof.

The roofs of all the buildings along here were within a few feet of the same height. Two- to three-foot walls bordered each roof, while the roofs themselves were covered with tar paper and asphalt, and sometimes with gravel as well. This roof was not graveled. The tar paper was ripped in several places, revealing lower layers, and Rogers judged that the building's roof had received no attention in years.

The roof sloped slightly to the rear, and seemed to sag toward the center as well. A cupola poked up at one side, where the inside stairs debouched onto the roof. Further back were chimneys, and a clutter of miscellaneous hardware that might once have been a TV aerial.

Rogers moved quickly to the eastern edge, and climbed over the wall onto the next roof. It was depressingly similar.

In this manner he made his way from rooftop to rooftop until at last he was at the corner building, overlooking Maiden Lane. He edged his head over the edge and stared down.

Below, the street was filled with trucks and men. It was amazing; like something on a movie set. It was hard to believe it could really be happening, here in Lower Manhattan. The street was in deep shadow, but here and there flashlights showed, an occasional match flared.

They were robbing the Federal Reserve Bank of over twelve billion in gold! It was fantastic. He had to marvel at the audacity of the man who called himself the Eagle. What could the man be thinking of? How could he dispose of such a fantastic quantity of gold—assuming he could get it? As Rogers had told the girl, gold is not negotiable in the United States. A billion in gold might as well be so many lead bricks. It was traceable, and fantastically hot. No one would handle it.

No one in this country, at any rate.

That set his brain to work. They were taking the gold to Staten Island. Staten Island had miles of unpatrolled beaches and bays. If you were taking the gold *out* of the country, what better way? A large boat, a freighter, standing offshore—freighters often anchored off Staten Island or in the New York Bay for days—quietly loading by launch at night.

Where could they take the gold?

He began considering the deeper implications. The United States was already having trouble with its balance of payments. When U.S. tourists spent dollars in foreign countries, or American companies set up shop there, the money they spent was redeemable by those foreign countries in gold. France was one country which had recently begun cashing in its hoard of dollars against United States gold, at the rate of fifty-four million dollars a month.

While France insisted on possession of its gold, many countries did not, banking their newly acquired gold right where it had always been, in the New York City Federal Reserve Bank.

Suppose you stole the gold that belonged to other countries?

Suppose you stole U.S. gold?

Either way you would badly damage the United States. Its gold reserves back its currency, making the dollar the most stable currency in the world. Steal foreign gold on deposit, and you create an international incident of major proportions. Restitution would be demanded. U.S. gold stocks would necessarily be substituted.

The effect would not be very different. The dollar would be undermined, and the United States would be badly hurt.

And who would stand to gain by this? Who could reintroduce the gold to the world market as freshly mined and refined?

Only two countries today are doing much serious gold-producing—South Africa and Russia. Russia supports itself on the world market with the gold dug from its Siberian mines.

It all began to make an ominous sort of sense.

At five o'clock, Raven poked his head up the hole and into the vault, the rays from Starling's light catching him full on and making him blink.

"That's it," he said. "We're closing shop."

Starling glanced at his watch, and then shuddered. "I wondered."

"How much we got left?"

Starling gestured with the light, sweeping it around the vault. It looked scarcely touched. It was empty only in the

corner nearest the tunnel exit.

Raven sighed. "A shame to leave all that stuff, but I guess we'll have to make do. I hope the Eagle ain't too disappointed."

"Let's get out of here!"

"Yeah, yeah."

They watched the last load taken out, rode up the elevator with it, and saw it stowed away in the last sagging truck.

Starling called in his men.

"Okay, this is it. You've all been paid. It's over. Time to disperse. Don't think about going back in there for a last one for your pockets. You couldn't cash it." He waved his arm. "Let's go."

The men moved by two's and three's up the street, heading for subways and buses, or cars parked nearby. None of them would successfully escape.

Raven and Starling joined the Sparrow at the black Continental. "Okay," he said. "Let's get outta here, huh?"

The car doors slammed, and then the engine started up. The lights came on, cutting thick beams through the fog. Without turning into Liberty Place, the car headed east on Liberty Street.

It rolled quietly past the square Federal Reserve Bank building, and then was swallowed by the fog.

CHAPTER 13

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

As dawn approached, Captain America had found his way back down from the rooftops. The heavy darkness of the unlit streets and the swirling fog that moved through them were allies. The fog muffled sounds and concealed his passage up the street.

Just ahead of him now was the vague shape of the parked Continental, its massive trunk facing him. He recognized the car and its diplomatic license; it was one of those near which he'd parked the Volkswagen at the U.N. It had to be the car he'd been kidnapped in.

The car blocked the end of Liberty Place effectively.

Droplets of mist, condensed from the fog, stood out sharply on its highly waxed surface. There seemed to be no one close by; the nearest guard was a man laboriously lighting his cigarette, his hands cupped around his face, twenty yards away. Rogers smiled. He'd never pass muster in the army! Sloppy stance, wandering attention, he was a lousy guard—which was just fine.

The trunk of the car was locked, but Rogers removed his shield from his left arm and pushed its edge under the lip of the trunk lid. The high-alloy steel did not even bend as his heavily muscled body applied pressure and leverage. There was a muffled rasp, and the trunk lid, counter-sprung, started to swing up and open. He grabbed it quickly, before

the abrupt motion could catch the careless guard's attention. Then, sliding the shield in ahead of him, he climbed into the trunk and pulled the lid down after him. There was plenty of room, room enough to stretch out and be almost comfortable. He slipped down his left gauntlet from his wrist and glanced at his watch. Almost five o'clock. They must be closing up soon. In another half hour it would be growing light. He relaxed, and waited.

Twenty minutes later, he heard voices approaching the car, but too muffled to be understood. The metal body of the car transmitted more faithfully, however, the sound of door latches and the heavy thunk of the doors slamming shut. The car shifted and settled as the three men took their seats, and then the engine was setting up a distant hum, and they were moving.

He felt the turns, and could guess the approximate distance traveled between them. The streets, forever being dug up for one reason or another, were jouncing and uneven all the way to the Brooklyn Bridge approaches, where finally the ride smoothed out. Rogers clung to the trunk lid, and waited.

The car followed the Beltway south, over western Brooklyn, taking the fork to the right that put it on the new expressway approach to the Verazanno-Narrows Bridge, Interstate 278. The fog was thick along the waterfront, but thinned as the route dodged briefly inland before swinging up over the bridge.

Sparrow was driving now, the seat pulled all the way forward to accommodate his short legs, much to Starling's discomfort. Sparrow knew where the estate was, however, and had insisted on driving. It was, after all, a car the Eagle had obtained for their use, DPL tags and all, and therefore Starling's rights to it were hardly proprietary, despite the fact that he had used it almost exclusively until now. This

fact calmed him very little, however. He was feeling the head-pounding, stomach-cramping, adrenalized effects of extreme tension, the tension of trying to make this whole incredible operation work. His hands shook as he took out another cigarette and pushed in the dash lighter. They shook no less appreciably when Raven pointed out, with a certain sardonic tone to his voice, that he still had a half-smoked cigarette between his lips. The cigarettes were tasteless, anyway. He didn't know why he was smoking them.

The traffic signals on the bridge were blinking yellow for all lanes. Fog swirled thickly over them. Sparrow drove in the extreme right-hand lane, keeping the railing barely in sight. Their speed had slowed to twenty miles an hour, and even then they almost collided with the rear of a large semi-that was climbing the bridge far slower, the tiny sprinkling of red lights on its trailer winking out at them only at the last moment.

Sparrow drove with implacable silence, his face showing no expression, even after they had passed the truck. It was as though his face was only a mask. Starling felt almost like reaching out and ripping it off, just to be confronted by *feelings*, something on which to release his own bottled-up tensions. But there was nothing to do but light another cigarette.

They crept into the toll plaza, coasting up to the single booth still open at this hour. Starling felt an inexplicable rush of fear as Sparrow lowered his window and banded a ten-dollar bill to the man in the booth. He wanted to stamp down with his left foot, very suddenly, upon Sparrow's foot hovering over the gas pedal; to stamp down and make the car *move*, to *get away*.

The man was counting the bills very slowly, counting them three times, the third time into Sparrow's calmly waiting hand. Starling fought his panic. Did they usually

take this long? Didn't they usually keep packets of change ready for such an occasion? The small sign on the booth warned, "Count Your Change," but did the toll taker normally count it out, like a clerk in a supermarket? Was he trying to delay them?

Then they were smoothly accelerating away, and Starling spoke. "I don't like it," he said nervously. "That man took too long."

"Relax," Raven said from the back seat. "It's cold, clammy weather. His fingers were stiff. There's no traffic now, he can take his time. Besides, why worry? We're safe. There's not an ounce of gold in this car, nothing to connect us up. They could stop us now for speeding, and we'd be clean."

"They won't." Sparrow continued to stare ahead through the fog. "We're not speeding."

He took the ramp up to a local street, and turned left. The street led a curving path through an old neighborhood, past a private school. The road was red brick, damp and slippery in this misty fog.

The sky was lightening, but this only turned the fog a milkier hue, without thinning it. Sparrow pushed in the lights, leaving only parking lights, then pulled them back on full.

They drifted like ghosts through an abandoned traffic circle, and then were on a wide boulevard, Hylan Boulevard. The car moved effortlessly south, through clusters of haloed traffic lights, all green, past shopping centers, new apartment developments, open fields, and older villages. The boulevard cut south-west, roughly following the eastern shore of the island to its southern tip, a distance of some ten miles from the bridge.

Staten Island, even without the fog, was another country, another land, difficult to associate with New York City,

although it was the fifth borough of the City. When a green New York City Transit Authority bus passed by, it was a jarring reminder, but seemed out of place, lost.

Until the completion of the bridge, Staten Island—the borough of Richmond—had been accessible to the rest of the City only by ferry. It had retained its bucolic character, its farms, indeed, supplying many of the vegetable bins of city supermarkets. It was an island of rolling wooded hills, of scattered townships and villages, some three centuries old, reminders that New York was first settled by the Dutch, not the English. The bridge had brought the city to the island, though, and now developers hastily sliced farmlands into miniature subplots, erected cheese-box houses of cardboard quality, and sold them in profusion to harried New Yorkers seeking suburbia.

But most of the land development was in the northern part of the island. As Sparrow drove south, they left the new construction behind. Here was an area mapped for streets and houses thirty years ago, fire hydrants standing alone in the woods, cracked concrete lanes all but covered by weeds and grass.

At the southern tip of the island was the village of Tottenville, a town with narrow, one-way streets, closely set old frame houses, and access, across the Outerbridge Crossing, to nearby New Jersey, where most of the town's residents worked and shopped. Sparrow wheeled the car through near-empty streets, until he came to a high fence that ran along a weed-choked concrete road. The fence was of boards, and buried beneath years of vines. Behind it, not visible from the street side, was a wall of brick, much newer.

Sparrow touched his horn ring briefly, and the gates to a long drive swung open.

Once this had been a farm. They drove past the weathered old house along the rutted drive, and parked

near a large barn. Inside the barn, Starling caught the glint of light on metal. The trucks were parked there.

"So at last we meet the elusive Eagle," Raven said, climbing from the car, raising his arms over his head and stretching. He drew a deep breath. "Good air out here. I can't smell the city at all."

"You wait until the breeze is from New Jersey," Sparrow smiled thinly. "It's worse." He led them up onto the back porch of the old house, and inside.

Captain America waited until the voices had receded, then inched the trunk lid open for a fast peek.

Fog lay heavily over the ground, making the house and nearby trees gray and insubstantial-looking. The trees dripped, drops falling irregularly upon the resonant trunk lid. A light went on in one window of the house, then two more. The light was warm and inviting. The humidity outside seemed to cut through to his bones.

No one was in sight. He wondered if the police had sealed the exits by now. He hoped they were standing by, he might well need their support. Cautiously, he stepped from the trunk and strapped on his shield.

The turf underfoot was damp and squishy, the remains of unmowed summer grass, littered with fallen leaves and twigs. Fortunately, it was too sodden to make any noise.

He crept to the nearest window, and looked in. He could see a tall, bald man, making nervous gestures with his arms. No one else could be seen. The window was closed. He could hear nothing.

The cold tip of a gun touched his spine.

"Okay, fella, ease back gentle now." It was Randolph, one of the two men who had jumped him before.

He could have taken the man, standing right there. The gunman had been too close for his own safety; commandos

were routinely warned never to get that close with a gun—only with a knife.

But he wanted to get inside, and this way was as good as any. As a prisoner, he would be taken for granted. He had no doubt he could handle the situation.

“All right,” he said calmly. “You’ve made your point.”

Randolph prodded him around to the back porch steps. There were over a dozen moments when he could have overpowered the man. But he bided his time.

“Boss? Got a surprise for you!”

The door opened and Marcus stood back, letting Randolph bring his prize in, through an antiquated kitchen and a long-unused dining room, to a parlor-type room.

Three men were in the room, and all turned to look at him in surprise. Two of them—the tall, thin, bald man, and a paunchy, friendly looking man with an overgrown mop of hair—were strangers, although he fitted them, from Robin’s description, with their cover names, Starling and Raven.

The third man in the room was John B. Gaughan.

The two locked eyes and stared at each other as though the room were empty but for the two of them.

“I should have known, ‘Sparrow,’” Captain America said. “You people always seemed to know just a little too much.”

“What’s he talking about, Sparrow?” Starling said. “What’s he *mean*?”

“What I want to know,” Raven drawled, “is how this sonuvva got here. Last time I saw him, he was tied up in my living room.”

Gaughan—Sparrow—said nothing.

“Your friend, the Sparrow,” Captain America told Starling, “also goes under the name of John Gaughan. He’s a Vice Director of the Federal Reserve Bank, in Manhattan.”

"It was Robin," Sparrow said. His voice was high and abrupt. "She let you loose, didn't she?"

"Let's just say she acquired some sense."

"I had misgivings about her from the start," Sparrow muttered. "But she was too lovely to resist."

"Wait a minute," Raven said. "*You* had misgivings? You mean, you brought her in?"

Sparrow smiled a cold smile. "That's right. I'm afraid the deception goes farther than you'd thought. Gentlemen, I am the Eagle!"

The other two stared at him, open-mouthed. But Rogers spoke.

"Let's not stop there, 'Sparrow.' Why not pull out *all* stops?"

Sparrow's eyes glinted. "So you recognized me from the sound of my voice, eh, Captain America?"

"It took me a long time. I didn't catch on to you at all when you were just being John Gaughan, a fussy bank official. You changed your voice a bit for that role. Then, when you unmasked me—I was awake then—I thought your voice was familiar, but I wasn't yet hearing too well. At first, when I saw you here, I thought I was just recognizing Gaughan's voice. But I wasn't."

"Er, Sparrow—er, Eagle—what's he talking about?" Starling was kneading his hands in tension.

"Yeah, what's going on?" Raven chimed in. "So you were the Eagle all along? That's cute. I'll buy that. But what's *he*"—he jabbed a finger at Captain America—"talking about? You guys know each other?"

"I'm afraid we do," the small man said. "It's an—ah—acquaintanceship that goes back many years. Many years. I wasn't sure, when I unmasked you," he said, speaking directly to Captain America. "You looked too young. You

looked not much older than when we first locked horns—back during the Great War.”

“Your side lost,” Rogers said.

“But I have found another side,” the man said. “They pay well for success, and they allow me to operate as a free agent.”

“I thought as much. It was the only thing that made sense out of this fantastic robbery. But how well do they pay for failure?”

“Failure?” The little man’s voice rose an octave. “I have not failed! We have less than the whole thirteen billion, but we have taken a great deal. Three billion at least!”

“I doubt it. Do you know how much a billion dollars in gold weighs? Over eight hundred fifty-four *tons*. I don’t believe your small fleet of trucks brought out even one billion.”

“No! You lie!” He was screaming now. “It makes no difference, no difference at all. I have stolen a billion in gold! And I have Captain America in my grasp again!”

“Boss.” It was Randolph, speaking for the first time since he had pushed Rogers into the room. He was the only one there with a drawn gun.

“Silence, you fool! Look at you all, your mouths gaping, your eyes hanging out. You don’t understand. You can’t understand!” He lifted his hands to his throat.

“You don’t know yet who I am!”

With thin, facile fingers, he pulled loose the skin of his jowls, and pulled it up, over his head, stripping his face of its flesh, leaving only a bloody grinning skull.

The room was frozen, and in that moment, Captain America made his move. Somewhere inside him a hand clamped down, speeding adrenaline into his system, accelerating his metabolism, doubling his reflexes, and his speed. In one swift motion he stepped backward, stamping down hard with his heel on Randolph’s instep, pivoting on it,

his elbow sinking into the man's gut, and then chopping with his other hand at the gun. Around him, the room was still in a slow-motion crawl.

Randolph screamed. His foot was broken. Captain America caught the magnum 38 in his left hand, hefted it, and sidestepped to a corner of the room where he could command both doors and all the occupants. Blood pounded in his ears and he took two deep breaths to calm his system.

"All right, Red Skull," he said, nodding at the man who still stood with John Gaughan's face in his hand. "The show is over. The place is surrounded by cops. We've had you all under observation since you began this night's insane work. As I said, you've failed."

The Red Skull—a man scarred and misshapen in both mind and body, a Nazi, once Hitler's ace terrorist agent—stood stock-still, as though stunned.

But Starling moved. He remembered once before, when he had faced a man with a gun. He had shot and killed that man. He could do so again. He understood nothing of this fantastic caricature who had been their leader except that it must be as Captain America had said. They had failed. His hand flashed into his coat.

He had the gun half out when the gun in Captain America's hand spoke a single shot. The bullet drilled through his thigh as though through tissue paper, shattering his hip, throwing him to the floor.

But it did not kill him—not instantly. He squeezed off a shot in the general direction of where Captain America had been standing before the darkness closed in. The bullet ricocheted. Then he dropped the gun.

"Apparently this thing shoots high," Rogers said, hefting the magnum. "Anyone else want to try his luck? You, Red Skull?"

Raven had his hands raised anxiously. "Don't shoot, fella. I'm peaceable. I've never handled a gun in my life."

Rogers smiled grimly. "Keep it that way."

The death's head visage of the Red Skull twisted in a horrible grimace. It seemed meant as a smile.

"You would not shoot us, Captain America. Not in cold blood. See, my hands are empty."

Rogers sensed movement from the dining-room door, but, before he could move, a shot rang out.

"You lose, Red Skull," said Marcus, stepping in through the doorway.

The Red Skull's mouth gaped as his wide jawbone fell slack. He clutched himself. His eyes were wide and staring in their deep sockets as his knees folded and he fell to the floor.

As the Red Skull fell, Captain America trained his gun on Marcus. "Drop the gun," he said.

Marcus let the gun fall. "You asked him the price of failure," he said.

Rogers nodded. "You people never fully trust anyone, do you?"

"It was an insane idea to begin with," Marcus said. "But when he brought it to us, we decided what was there to lose? He is a free agent, available to the highest bidder. If he fails, we have not been involved." He gave a sarcastic laugh. "What made him think he could get away with it? If he had succeeded, your army and navy, your air force—everyone would have been combing the whole country, both oceans."

"He expected cash for the gold?"

"Fifty percent. We have dollar reserves available."

"And you were to have a freighter waiting offshore for the pickup?"

“That was his plan, yes. I...”

The sound of shattering glass swung them all around to the window.

The Red Skull was gone!

Captain America spoke first. “Don’t get excited and try anything. The place is surrounded. He won’t get far.” He mentally crossed his fingers, hoping.

A bitter fire burned in the Red Skull’s brain, an extension of the hot wire that ran through his shoulder. He panted as he ran, dodging through the wet underbrush. Failure! He’d failed! Worse. He’d been sold out. Twice he’d been sold out. First by that double-crossing vixen of a girl—damn her inviting figure—and then by that commie agent, Marcus. Sell him short, would they? Gun him down like a common American punk? He’d show them. He’d show them!

He made his way down to the wharf. They didn’t know about this! They didn’t realize that his property extended down to the waterline. He had his escape route ready, everything waiting. They’d be empty-handed yet, and some day, when they’d forgotten and he hadn’t, he’d be back—to settle the score.

He pulled at the ropes, and the slim, wave-hugging speedboat moved slowly out from under the rotted boards. He cast the line loose, and jumped down into the shallow cockpit. He threw out his right arm to steady himself, and almost screamed in pain as his shoulder gave.

But then he was settled, strapped into the tiny racing cockpit. He touched the starter, and the big engines throbbed into life. He throttled back on them quickly. They were unmuffled, their exhaust going into the water. He swung the wheel, and began edging the boat out into deeper water.

He was only fifty yards from shore when a heavy yellow beam impaled him and the boat.

"This is the Coast Guard," spoke an amplified and disembodied voice. "We have you on radar and in sight. We have guns trained on you. Prepare to be picked up."

"No!" he screamed. He shook his fist at the light. "No, I won't!" he rammed the throttle all the way forward.

The tiny boat gave a great leap up onto the surface of the water and, engines roaring, shot out past the fog-shrouded Coast Guard cutter.

A siren sounded, the banshee wail sliding up and down the scale. Then there was the boom of a gun.

It was a direct hit. All they ever found were expensive hardwood splinters.

Of the already wounded Red Skull, there was no trace. They dragged the bay, but without success. The tides are fierce along that section of coast. The undertow might have dragged him miles out to sea.

And there was no one who shed a tear.

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